RUNNING HEAD: DRIVE-THROUGH EDUCATION: CONSUMERISM & HIGHER EDUACTION

# Drive-Through Education: Consumerism & Higher Education

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"This is the only place in the world where a consumer eventually *becomes* the product. This is the only place where the product literally does sell itself." This is the introduction I received on my first day at work. My first real job after college: Undergraduate Admission Counselor for the university I had just graduated from. My new boss went on, "I know it's something of a taboo statement, but admission work really is sales. We have a product that costs almost $25,000 per year for four years (or more), guarantees almost nothing in return for the investment other than a piece of paper, and the university will likely ask you for *more* money even after you've graduated. We can't go to trade shows as traditional salespeople because we have nothing to show. We can't open up shop in the mall because what we sell is experience and knowledge. We sell the intangible. We sell the impossible…and we do it at a premium price." I left my first day of work feeling extremely overwhelmed and extraordinarily disillusioned. Surely higher education is nobler than sales. Surely the academy fiercely fights against the notion of selling knowledge to the highest bidder. Surely our culture deeply values knowledge and higher education. But after six years working in the field of Admissions in higher education, I have seen first-hand the sales-driven marketing of knowledge and the academy, the consumer-driven demand for "the college experience" rather than knowledge for the sake of knowledge, and students' and families' ever-growing sense of entitlement. The expanding attitude of consumerism has reached out from the shopping malls and stock markets into the very heart of the academy. Unchecked, our capitalistic society will consume the heart of knowledge and learning and leave in its place rote memorization and soul-less, passionless lectures.

**Consumerism: Signs of the Times**

There should be little surprise at the current consumer-driven state of higher education. The institution of the academy was born of vocation. In the founding days of American higher education, the academy was intentionally designed to provide training to young men seeking a ministerial vocation. As our society recognized desperate needs for clergy, it gave birth to the American academy. Those students attending the academies had every intention of serving their society once they graduated, and most maintained on-going service of some kind during their enrollment. Higher education was a service to society and society sought to serve the academy in return (see Figure 1). Our culture quickly realized the benefit of educated citizens and immediately sought to include multiple courses of study that served professional and occupational training in an increasingly industry-driven society (Harada, 1994). In the midst of this mutually beneficial relationship between society, industry, and the institution of higher education there developed academic freedom and progress. Students who enrolled in American colleges and universities developed strong senses of civic duty, democracy and spirituality. These components of education were considered the moral backbone of society. Our infant culture looked to our educated citizens to lead our nation, heal our sick, minister to our lost, and preserve our basic freedoms.

From its noble beginnings as instruction for clergy, higher education quickly evolved into a training ground for professions. The use of apprenticeships in colonial education became the norm and were immensely popular as the apprenticeship model was practical, flexible and inexpensive (Rudolph, 1962). The recent emergence of online

higher educational opportunities are ironically marketed as being precisely what colonial education offered: practical, flexible and inexpensive.

The vocation-focus of higher education has only increased, as have the levels of consumerism and social demand for education at the will and fingertips of the people. The fastest growing and largest institution of higher education today is the University of Phoenix with more than 75,000 students on more than 130 campuses in 15 states, Puerto Rico and Canada. More than 15,000 or Phoenix's students are enrolled exclusively in online courses (O'Meara, 2001). Corporate sponsorship is common on college and university websites, athletic facilities and teams, and on academic research, not to mention on campuses. Clearly the days of all-male theological training grounds are gone. We are facing a new era in higher education: the era of educational consumerism.

**Consumer Students**

"Students have become customers, and colleges have become vendors" (O'Meara, 2001). Students arrive on our campuses as consumers first and students second. Student-customers rarely drive educational improvements because many are satisfied with the least demanding curriculum available for their dollar. So-called "bargain basement students" contribute little and demand even less from their college experiences (Creech, 1994; Schwartzman, 1999). Therefore, consumer students may be a significant threat to the quality of education that colleges and universities can offer if we become too responsive to public educational demands.

We can hardly expect students to change their evolved attitudes about higher education. As the academy has evolved with students, the result has been the development of an educational system that serves society but places students at the center

of all service (see Figure 2). While this fact in and of itself is not wrong, the corollary that students need not serve anyone other than themselves is. We have allowed our educational system to serve our institutions, our faculty, our society, and our students. Our faculty serve the institution, society and students. Society serves students and the institution. But students serve only themselves. Of course there are exceptions among our students, but the culture of being a student has become ego-centric and self-serving. If colleges and universities are vendors, we merely provide a commodity which implies that students need do nothing more than passively receive our goods or product: knowledge (wa Mwachofi et al., 1995). Students may think "that a university education requires no more effort or involvement than making a purchase" (Rodeheaver, 1994, p. 2).

Consumerism is deeply ingrained in our cultural identity, touching even the most noble and intangible of realms: our language. Students "get" grades rather than earn them, and "go to" or "attend" college rather than contribute to the learning and educational processes. Even the term "scholarship" has in recent years been inextricably linked to the almighty dollar. Students can "get" "scholarships" for anything one might imagine, and most "scholarships" have little to do with actual study or scholarship. This language must have an influence on our students' interpretation of what it means to enroll in a college or university. Our language subtly perpetuates the student-as-consumer paradigm.

**Consumerism and the Institution**

From academics to admissions, consumerism has profoundly and irreparably impacted American higher education. Colleges and universities behave more like

businesses than institutions as they actively recruit their students and employees. Admission representatives actively attempt to sell their product, but the question then must be: what is the product (Zemsky, 1993)? Are colleges and universities seeking to sell students? Are we seeking to sell an education? Are we seeking to sell experience, professional preparation, or simply a diploma? The ambiguity of the answer to these questions should indicate that the "product" mentality must be released. Higher education must shift its paradigm from selling the intangible to promoting the noble.

Consumerism's effect on academic freedom and freedom of thought is yet murky, though doubtless an impending disappointment. As the public and business sectors look to invest increasing amounts of time, energy and, of course, money into the research occurring on college and university campuses nationwide, the inevitable result is an ever-increasing influence over the academy itself. While it is certainly true that most research being conducted in American institutions of higher education occurs in dynamic environments of academic freedom, the emerging reality is one in which the organization that funds the research will determine the messages being taught to our students.

In the ideal structure with educational consumerism, society's interests, financial and otherwise, have direct impact on student learning (see Figure 3). In our current state with educational consumerism, while much of society's interests are communicated to students, it must occur via indirect means (see Figure 4). The educational consumerism that has evolved creates a distinct and damaging break between students and the institution. As society pushes institutions with financial incentives to pursue specific research agendas, the institutions push faculty members to conduct more research and publish. As faculty shift their collective focus from teaching to research, their ability to

influence students is minimized. Though faculty members necessarily have fewer opportunities for impacting relationships with their students, their influence in society and culture is expanded. The rift occurs when students are taught by graduate assistants or adjunct faculty who may be out of sync with cultural and institutional demands. Further, supplemental instructors likely have no connection with the ongoing research that is demanded by society, which means that new research is not being taught in the classrooms of our colleges and universities. Students lose out on the opportunity for the espoused "cutting edge research" they are promised in the recruitment brochures.

The consumerism rift widens as students experience the ways in which the institution mirrors the business and public sectors. Higher education today even mimics big business in the manner in which it measures its performance and success. Universities and colleges rate their success according to test performance, grading, and numbers of students enrolled and retained. Further, the public measures the quality of an institution of higher education according to the size of its endowment and national rankings. Rarely does our society concern itself with matters of critical thinking, meaningful learning, freedom of thought or even liberal arts (in the classical sense) education. Our capitalistic society and educational consumerism have created a drive-through, fast-food approach to higher education: students go where they can get what they want as quickly as possible, as conveniently as possible, even if it's mass-produced. This drive-through educational attitude is further fed by our culture's preoccupation with credentials. The demand for a piece of paper that proves you did the work and served your time is more significant in today's workplace than what you learned along the way. In our rush to provide the paper, we reveal only the tip of the educational iceberg to our

students. We neglect the deeper, more difficult educational work, and we are robbed of the deeper, more meaningful results.

Similarly, we cheat our students out of the opportunity to develop truly strong work ethics. By bending to their fast-food educational demands, we allow them to glide through educational processes that should appropriately challenge their competence, identity, purpose, emotions, and spirituality.

Ever greater numbers of students are applying to colleges and universities for admission. College has become the obligatory next step for the vast majority of eligible students today. The consumer mentality of students drives them to want and need greater salaries in order to afford the material items our capitalistic society convinces them they need. And higher education is strategically placed between students and the material wealth they desire. Education is a stepping stone. It is a means to an end. The result of this attitude is a culture in which a bachelor's degree is undervalued, students choosing not to attend college are underestimated, and knowledge for the sake of knowledge is a quaint idea rather than a practical reality.

**A Christian Response to Consumerism**

Christian higher education may have a distinct advantage over public institutions in freeing itself from consumer-driven education. A significant criticism of educational consumerism is its apparent inability to teach morality and citizenship (Korgen and Odell, 2003). Today, service learning education and programming permeates most college and university curricular and co-curricular plans. But higher education influenced by the person of Jesus Christ will inherently be better equipped to introduce students to the concepts of service, morality and citizenship.

Christian higher education presents students with a unique opportunity to encounter admission processes that are honest, academics infused with integrity, an intentional integration of faith and learning thereby building a sense of moral responsibility and civic duty, and exist on a campus freer from materialism than most large public institutions could hope to be.

Christian college campuses, that truly embody and live out their faith-based mission, will demonstrate authenticity and honest admission processes and procedures. Rather than going after the hard sell and filling the seats at any cost, Christian campuses by their very nature should be, and in many cases are, better at admission work than their public institution counterparts. While it is certainly true that Christian colleges are as tuition dependent as other institutions, if not more so, their affiliation with the Church will make them more likely to be forthright with prospective students and families.

The academic environment on Christian college campuses, like the admission processes, will be honest and forthright. Students can experience the intellectual freedom and challenge of small classroom environments in which instructors actively engage them. Further, as faith traditions are integrated into the classroom environment, students' learning can be richer, fuller and free from biased or politically tainted agendas.

Students choosing Christian colleges should be poignantly aware of the limitations of attending a smaller institution with limited resources. Christian colleges frequently have out-dated buildings and fewer technology resources. But if we are seeking to break the cycle of consumer-driven and capitalistic materialism, do these "short-comings" truly have a negative impact on students' educational experiences? Or is it possible that fewer resources could *enhance* the educational experience?

Clearly the greatest advantage Christian colleges have over their public colleagues is their ability to challenge, mold and shape students moral and faith development. Students attending Christian colleges are regularly presented with theological questions and debates, both formally and informally. Students engage in discussions regarding the most profound moral questions in the classroom and have the opportunity to be mentored by faculty and administration alike. Christian college students must reconcile the desperate needs of the world with their privilege and opportunities. As a result of the formative moral experiences and education students receive at Christian colleges, they are better prepared to return to society to make the most meaningful impact possible. While it is true that many students graduating from Christian colleges may not go on to be multi-millionaires or hold public office, they are equipped to live extraordinary lives. They are better prepared to enter society and live lives of integrity, pursue social justice, and contribute their whole selves to the world around them through the passion and love of Christ. Conversely, their peers graduating from public institutions may be content to enter society seeking the most pay for the least work, and seeking self-promoting prestige and power.

Consumerism is a dilemma facing the whole of our culture and society, including our higher education system. Ironically, the solution to educational consumerism may already exist in the Christian colleges and universities across the country. As the higher education systems continue to grow and evolve, the greatest sign of hope may the integrity of the Christian colleges who are willing to make students work for their degrees, slow down and critically consider their education, and live responsibly.

Figure 1: Cycle of Service

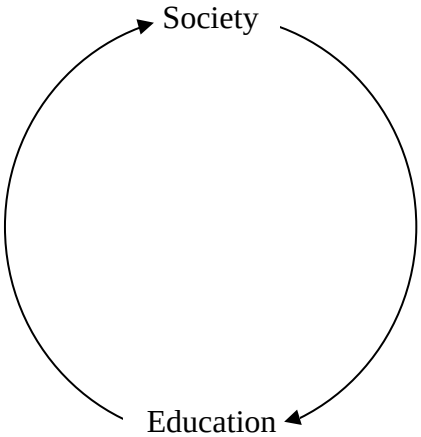



Figure 2: Students at the Center

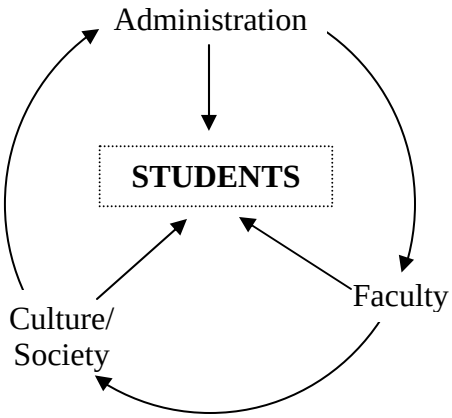



Figure 3: Ideal Flow of Financial Influence

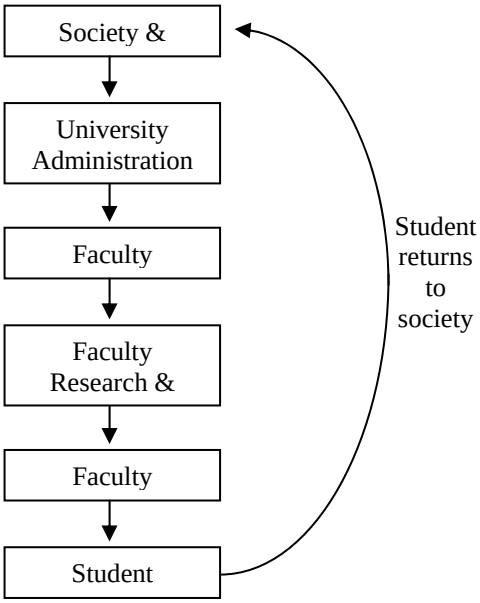
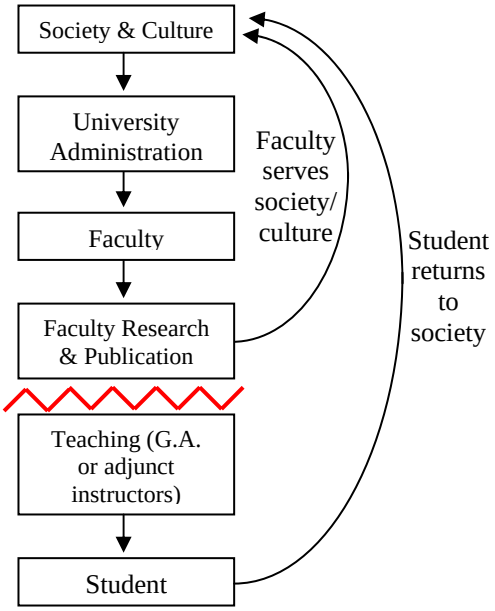



Figure 4: Realistic Flow of Financial



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