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"I've a Feeling We're Not in Kansas Anymore": The Commercialization and Commodification of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

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This article examines and analyzes the private sector's commercialization and commodification of teaching and learning in higher education. An important issue related to this fast-growing relationship is the blind acceptance of the marketplace model as it relates to technology use, teaching, and learning in higher education. This relationship is suspect from the outset because the goals and purposes important to the private sector do not blend with those important to educational communities. Moreover, there appears to be little concern about implications and consequences associated with the marketing and selling of teaching and learning. An argument is made that by commercializing and commodifying teaching and learning, training becomes confused with education and teaching, and learning becomes decontextualized, simplistic, and mechanistic; void of human interactions; focused on competition and securing profit margins; and the means to prepare for a future emphasizing individualism and the lifestyle goals of control, efficiency, and predictability. Higher education professionals are urged to think carefully about teaching and learning becoming just another commodity that is conveniently packaged for student customers in academic settings turned virtual marketplaces.

If you have been paying attention to recent advertisements about the use of technology in reforming and transforming teaching and learning in higher education, I am sure you are aware of the following types of messages and announcements.

Knowledge is a powerful thing. So are our solutions. . . . The concept of mobile computing has emerged as a new model for enhanced student learning. . . . With over 20 years experience and 1 billion in annual sales, Comark provides IT solutions to businesses and institutions nation wide. (Comark)

In the new millennium, your students' education will revolve around the World Wide Web. And, as the world's largest company dedicated solely to producing advanced information technology solutions for higher education . . . your constituents can gather realtime answers to realtime questions. (Datatel)

Life without technology isn't an option. . . . That's why we're concentrating on making life with it easier. . . . Making everyone instantly more productive. (Datatel)

Where can I find a computer system that performs like an accounting major, creates like an art major, and runs like a scholarship athlete? COMPAQ. Better Answers. (COMPAQ)

ThinkPad University puts IBM Thinkpad notebook computers into the hands of students and faculty, enhancing their productivity, education and overall competitiveness in the marketplace. (IBM)

We'll show you how to plug into new online tools and capabilities . . . and make the transition to "knowledge worker" that the new millennium demands. (OneonOne Computer Training)

Where can I get SUPERHUMAN POWERS? You are invited to the SUPER.HUMAN. SOFTWARE Tour 99. Solutions that bring faculty, students, and administration closer together. (IBM and Lotus)

Grow rich on the coming Technology Revolution. (Gilder Technology Report)

I'm supporting 30 TA's, 40 MA's and 30 Phd's. They all want their classes online today. (Bb Blackboard)

Do you want to improve the quality of your distance learning/training program so that you and your institution can become more competitive? (The Distance Learning Workshop)

Why such unprecedented change in higher education—and why now? We'll explore the market . . . and technological factors that have come together to create a new ecology of education. . . . It's not just a matter of finding new customers. It's about learning new ways to do business. Colleges and universities need to become faster-moving and better coordinated to compete. . . . Our panel will discuss: creating for-profit . . . structuring deals . . . how to redefine faculty roles, build[ing] a culture of change . . . rethink[ing] institutional design. (Market-Driven Higher Education—A Conference hosted by University Business Magazine)

Ironically, these corporate messages and announcements do actually reveal the critical issues that higher education must resolve to be positively positioned for the 21st century. However, they are not what are being sold through these advertisements. As a result, the critical issues are not being more competitive in the marketplace, hurrying to prepare for some future reality of tomorrow, or modifying programs that better prepare students for their future role as workers. Nor are they solving higher education problems by getting all faculty, staff, and students wired and connected, developing virtual classrooms that provide coursework to an anonymous and global student body, providing credentials that suggest learning has occurred, or satisfying the college-student customer's needs through programs emphasizing speed, convenience, efficiency, and quality management. Rather, what is underlying these messages and announcements is what is critical: to carefully examine and analyze the corporate communities' attempts to commercialize and commodify teaching and learning in higher education. This examination and analysis is necessary to understand the intensifying and expanding relationship between higher education and the private sector.

For purposes of this article, *commercialize* is defined as exchanging goods for purposes of profit making, whereas *commodity* is thought of as some-

thing used to achieve a specific purpose. Borgmann (1984) further described a commodity as a device that "makes no demands on our skill, strength, or attention" (p. 42). Borgmann also provided two additional elements that illustrate properties of a commodity: (a) the less demanding a commodity, the less we are aware of its presence, and (b) a commodity is free of context. Following this line of thinking, Monke (1998) suggested the defining aspect of a commodity is its convenience; it makes no demands, it is always available to anyone, anywhere, anytime. One wonders whether the private sector is simply engaged in marketing and selling teaching and learning, such as with other commodities (e.g., automobiles), or are they intent on redefining and remaking teaching and learning to create new market places with hundreds of thousands of captive customers? I believe outcomes associated with either of these scenarios are problematic and troubling. At the least, the potential to negatively shape the context of what it means to be educated appears great. Imagine teaching and learning being embodied in terms of its profit margin and characterized as making no demands, being free of context, and totally convenient.

Responses to the corporate messages and announcements that are intended to sell teaching and learning have been mostly positive and are becoming increasingly well received. Many in higher education seem to believe that the corporate community has the best interests of universities and colleges in mind when they provide opportunities to buy and sell teaching and learning as if they were simple commodities to be traded for profit.

Although one might assume that many in higher education would be eager to question the commercialization and commodification of teaching and learning, there is evidence to suggest this is not the case. What are reasons for this lack of critical thinking and analysis? One could be that some in higher education are worried about their future viability and have come to believe that technology will save them from an uncertain future (Dolence & Norris, 1995). This message is made loud and clear by those within the academy (Gilbert & Green, 1997), as well as those from the private sector (Murphy, 1999) and federal government (Gore, 1997).

Another explanation might be found in Lynch's (1996) notion of "memes," which are defined as "actively contagious ideas" (p. 2). Memes are self-sufficient and reproducing ideologies that gain control and grow in believability within a culture. Evidence of this pervasive meme (i.e., computer instructional tech-

nology is the means to solve many higher education problems and serves as the transforming and dominant instructional delivery system) is seen in the December 11, 1998, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. In this issue, 78% of advertisements promoted various hardware, software, and technology support services as ways to solve a myriad of problems, from developing online courses to creating convenient learning opportunities. This is a powerful directive difficult to ignore. In addition, *The New York Times* "Education Life Supplement" of August 1, 1999, advertised 19 different higher education courses and programs that used persuasive messages to convince potential students that their online course delivery programs were not only important but necessary for success.

> A world-class education without the classroom. Introducing the Internet-based Master of Public Health program. The new Internet-based MPH program from Johns Hopkins University lets you take classes anywhere, anytime.
> State University of New York. The most convenient way to a college degree! Take SUNY classes on-line: Connect to classmates, faculty, and resources at anytime and from any place.
> Prepare your Life for the 21st Century. 14-month fast-track Executive program. . . . Eight degrees available entirely through distance learning. . . .
> Prepare for the future's most in-demand job with the WebMaster 2000 Certificate.
> Seton Hall University offers you A Fast Track to a Doctorate in Educational Administration. Our Accelerated Ed.D Program will allow you to complete your studies in just 11 week-ends and two four-week summer sessions over a two-year perioed. . . . [It] won't interfere with career responsibilities. . . . You will be armed with valuable credentials that will give you the decisive edge in an increasingly competitive job market. (Sec. 4A)

These examples suggest that this meme is pervasive and very much part of the academic landscape. One need not look far to become aware of other examples supporting this ideological perspective. It is suggested that there are several other memes (e.g., only institutions that are transformed by technology will prosper in the 21st century) currently influencing the thinking about technology in higher education.

The intensifying and expanding relationship between the private sector and higher education suggests that there are many implications and consequences associated with the current technological commercialization and commodification of teaching and learning in higher education. Although, this area of technology study (i.e., corporate influence) is no different from other areas of technology study; implications and consequences go unquestioned because technology is believed to be so vitally important and necessary in preparing for a specified version of future realities.

Winner (1997) aptly labeled the outcome of this unquestioning as the "law of unintended consequences" (p. 6). This notion (i.e., not questioning technology) has support in the writings of Ellul (1964) and Postman (1992). Ellul warned that we are not aware of the long-term consequences of technology and suggested that these consequences will be long lasting and become evident only through experience. In *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, Postman wrote,

> First, technology is a friend. It makes life easier, cleaner, and longer. . . . Second, because of its lengthy, intimate, and inevitable relationship with culture, technology does not invite a close examination of its own consequences. It is the kind of friend that asks for trust and obedience, which most people are inclined to give because its gifts are truly bountiful. But, of course, there is a dark side to this friend. Its gifts are not without a heavy cost. Stated in the most dramatic terms, the accusation can be made that the uncontrolled growth of technology destroys the vital sources of humanity (p. xii).

An alternative perspective about these same issues is grounded in a different ideology suggesting that technology is the only way society can successfully prepare for the future. Given this ideology, why would anyone consider critical and careful questioning of these ideas?

> Society is undergoing a fundamental transformation from the Industrial Age to the Information Age. This is a global phenomenon. . . . All people, societies, organizations are affected. . . . Those who realign their practices most effectively to the Information Age will reap the substantial benefits. Those who do not will be replaced or diminished by more nimble competitors. (Dolence & Norris, 1995, p. 2)

An important outcome associated with the technological commercializing and commodfiying of teaching and learning is the effect this influence has on increasing the emphasis on training (i.e., learning to do), over education (i.e., learning to know), and whether this change is desirable.

Chapman (1998) summarized the training-education dilemma succinctly: "Concerns are . . . growing over the blurring of the line between education and training, and over the penetration of the university by corporate agendas, especially by companies that want to lock students and faculties into proprietary software and hardware" (p. D1). Another outcome is the effect this influence has on teaching and learning becoming decontextualized, simplistic, and mechanistic; void of human relations; focused on competition and securing profit margins; and the means to prepare for a future emphasizing individualism and the lifestyle goals of control, efficiency, and predictability (Ritzer, 1993). It is believed that responses to theses issues are not only ethical in nature but will greatly influence the future place of higher education in our society.

Given the significant differences in goals important to business and those goals valued by higher education, the relationship existing between the corporate community and higher education is suspect from the outset. Goals typically aligned with the business community relate to sales; production and competition; profit margin; market analysis and response; mergers, buyouts, and takeovers; and customer satisfaction. However, goals associated with higher education depict a different kind of thinking. For example, such goals as democratic perspective, lifelong learning, appreciation for context, excellence and equity, critical thinking, and an emphasis on process have always been considered important. It is obvious that there are serious incongruities between the purposes and goals of higher education and the private sector.

In addition to the fallacy that the goals of business and education are the same, this relationship also assumes, incorrectly, that individualization and competition always results in heightened motivation, increased production, and enjoyment (Kohn, 1992); that *work* and *training* are synonymous with *learning* and *education*, that companies and universities are parallel institutions, and that universities can maximize their production when students have the training and skills to compete and win jobs as 21st-century knowledge workers. These are dangerous assumptions to make as they reduce learning to measurable bits of "stuff" that can be observed, counted, measured, evaluated, and standardized. The end result may be teaching and learning that is decontextualized, empty, and thus meaningless.

The University as Marketplace

Historically, the private sector has always exerted some pressure on higher education teaching, curricula, and research. Whether in response to needs generated by the Industrial Age, potential military conflicts, or aerospace research and development, higher education has been part of the solution to problems such as these. Although, the current emphasis seems intensified with greater demands being placed and more pressure exerted on higher education. It has been reported that the commercialization of education could generate as much as $600 billion per year (Winner, 1997). In higher education, some of this income comes from outsourcing various campus services (e.g., food services) through private sector contracts.

Most troubling about outsourcing is that teaching and learning are now being viewed as just another way to generate profits (i.e., commercialization) through producing and selling courses, teaching materials, and curricula (i.e., commodification). For example, in 1997, the California State University (CSU) system forwarded a plan to create a corporation between the 23 CSU campus system and 4 corporate partners: Fujitsu, GTE, Hughes Electronics, and Microsoft. The purpose of this merger was to provide corporate leadership for all of the system's technological programs, including hardware, software, and technical assistance. As a result, the university community would become a convenient marketplace for these corporate partners. (NetAction, 1998). The downside of this merged system was aptly described by a student in the system: "This should be an education, not a training ground for Microsoft" (Young, 1997, p. A24). On September 1, 1999, the 53 campuses of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MSCU) signed a $575,000.00 per year agreement with Microsoft, with institution enrollment numbers used to assess costs to individual campuses. For Microsoft, this is the largest higher education partnership to date. This agreement provides MSCU institutions with Microsoft's entire software package: continuous software upgrades, technical support, and software for students after they graduate. In addition, Microsoft will provide training and software applications for all MSCU teacher education programs. The goal of this training is for teacher

education faculty to "to be better equipped to train emerging K-12 teachers on the integration of technology into the curriculum" (Young, 1997, p. A24). Faculty workshops will also be provided that lead to certification on Microsoft products. When faculty become certified, they will be better prepared "to infuse technology into the teaching and learning process to enhance the college curriculum" (Young, 1997, p. A24).

The overriding goal of this certification is for MSCU institutions to offer student training that leads to positions as Microsoft Certified Specialists, with entry-level salaries in excess of $50,000.00 per year. A Microsoft specialist was quoted as saying, "To be competitive in the workforce, the graduates of Minnesota State Colleges and Universities must be prepared to use leading-edge technology in their careers" (R. Barden, personal communication, September 1, 1999). Several issues emerge from this partnership that are not only troubling but question the very purpose of the university: an overemphasis on training, limited choice making of individual students and faculty in regards to teaching and learning materials, huge financial commitment when many MSCU institutions are badly in need of building repairs and students are regularly experiencing annual tuition increases, forced use of technology materials and training for teacher education programs based on assumptions that technology competence is associated with better prepared K-12 teachers and that technology use promotes K-12 student learning, conflict of interest through Microsoft certification programs that result in Microsoft-trained faculty to prepare students for employment with Microsoft, and an ideological perspective grounded in competition and careerism. Again, the private sector is gladly invited to turn the university into a monopolized market place, all in the name of technology and a perceived version of a future reality.

Another example of this more contemporary pressure is evident through the collegiate movement to adopt the Total Quality Management mantra. At the least, this movement has resulted in students being perceived as "customers" whose needs should drive the "operation" of the university. This results in too many student customers expecting the college classroom to make them happy and meet their needs, much like what they expect when visiting the shopping mall.

The University of Phoenix embodies the idea of the university as marketplace better than any other institution. It delivers courses to more than 50,000 students at about 100 campuses across the nation. Reasons for success emerge from its core ideas about effectively selling teaching and learning for profit. These include a modified academic calendar with convenient class schedules and locations; minimal curricula that requires far less classroom time and instruction than typical university courses; practical utilitarian approach to course development; low overhead costs from using rented space for classrooms, part-time practitioner teachers, virtual libraries, and no student union facilities; use of standardized teaching methods, materials, and curricula that ensure standardization and accountability; and a major focus on customer service and quality management (Fischetti, Anderson, Watrous, Tanz, & Gwynne, 1998). In *Always in Touch: A Practical Guide to Ubiquitous Computing*, Brown (1999) reinforces higher education's reliance on the marketplace for decision making when it comes to computer instructional technology. In a chapter titled "The compelling case for universal computers," he writes, "The marketplace has already answered the question, 'Are computers useful and wanted?' Computers are here and increasing!" (p. 3). In this scenario, we do not even question the decision making of the marketplace, so why wonder about consequences and ramifications associated with this thinking. This is a slippery slope leading to frightening consequences.

Perhaps, the most troubling marketplace influence is the powerful and constant push for higher education to better prepare students for their lives as workers and, as result, be even more closely linked to commerce, the economy, and bottom-line thinking. The message is that more skills training is necessary for college students to become more successful and efficient knowledge workers. This message has been recently applied through a new project titled Tek.Xam (L. Reed, personal communication, August 27, 1999). Passing the Tek.Xam results in certification that is predicted to assist liberal arts graduates searching for employment. Tek.Xam requires students to perform various computer-based operations (e.g., web page design), necessary for success in the "real world" of the new economy. Emerging from the project is an important question: What is the purpose of a liberal arts education? No one would argue about the importance of work and its meaning within a culture; however, the current emphasis appears to fall outside this boundary. For example, a recent document on labor shortages provided these directives.

Higher education must also do a better job preparing workers and supporting the acquisition of

higher skills by existing workers to make each more productive. New initiatives in higher education should be linked more closely to the needs of employees and industry clusters. . . . Worker training programs must become much more effective and responsive to market demands in preparing workers with appropriate hard and soft skills. (MSCU, 1999)

The intensity of this thinking is evident in words used by Dolence and Norris (1995): "There is no question that higher education is an 'industry'" (p. 81). One is struck by the use of the term *industry* in describing higher education. These authors go on to describe the role of education and training in higher education, by stating,

Institutions of higher education at all levels must focus more on both education and training. Using the tools of the Information Age will require more attention to training while individuals appropriately trained will be equipped to excel at their education. (p. 80)

I am not sure what this means, but one interpretation might be an increased emphasis on training, and that training will provide a foundation for later education. This is an interpretation that many, I hope, would find troubling. Of course, if higher education is perceived as an industry, then, it is not much of a leap to emphasize training.

Winner cleverly summarized the current relationship between the private sector and higher education in his 1997 article, "The Handwriting on the Wall: Resisting Technoglobalism's Assault on Education."

The overall effect . . . is to tie education ever more closely to the requirements of the transnational economy and the logic corporate priorities. Of course, in many respects these influences are nothing new. Since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, education has been closely and deliberately attuned to immediate and emerging needs of industry. To some extent each generation of students has been tailored to fit what the business firms have demanded. Remarkable at present, however, is the sheer intensification of this relationship, threatening earlier assumptions about the proper link between business and education. (p. 4)

Writing in *Corporate Classrooms: The Learning Business*, Eurich (1985) warned about the consequences associated with this more demanding relationship.

The danger is that, in a bid for survival, higher education will imitate its rivals, that careerism will dominate the campus as colleges pursue the marketplace goals of corporate education. If that happens, higher learning may discover that, having abandoned its own special mission, it will find itself in a contest it cannot win . . . [as] The goal of collegiate education at its best is to show how skills can be given meaning, place information in a larger contest, and discover the relationship to life's dilemmas. (p. xiv)

Hopefully, Winner and Eurich's ideas will serve to temper the intensifying relationship between the private sector and higher education and instead foster careful and deliberate thinking.

One wonders what the ultimate goal of placing teaching and learning in the middle of the marketplace will be? Will it be to neatly and efficiently prepare students for work through for-profit programs emphasizing skills training, convenience, and accelerated and fast-tracked programs, or will it be to foster an appreciation for knowing—an important ends in and of itself?

Courses for Sale: The Internet and Distance Learning

As previously noted, the commercialization and commodification of college courses, programs, and degrees through the private sector's manipulation of the Internet will very likely change the meaning and purpose of teaching and learning in higher education. For example, through this new and alleged transforming process, teaching may become void of human interaction and learning conveniently packaged for sampling by virtual customers. To better understand this potential predicament, let us examine one of the better-publicized online universities: Western Governor's University (WGU).

In the May 7, 1999, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, an article titled "A Virtual Student Teaches Himself" described an individual earning a degree without enrolling in any college courses (Young, 1999). WGU is the higher education institution providing this new degree completion program. Key components of this virtual program are compe-

tency testing and Internet use: "Students simply have to pass enough standardized tests and complete enough independent projects to convince the university that they've mastered the required material" (Young, 1999, p. A31). WGU proudly reported they are the first university to use third-party testing. In addition, WGU provides a clearinghouse for existing distance learning courses available through various colleges and universities.

The WGU student made this choice because it allowed him to create his own schedule, work at his own pace, and take advantage of his computer skills. He reported spending 5 to 10 hours per week at home working on his studies and estimates 18 months to complete his degree. In regards to peer interaction, he responded, "It would be nice to have a little interaction, but I can make that myself." Given that the ideas cooperation and community have been somewhat replaced in our society by individualization, materialism, and strong sense of self, one wonders if that is why today many think they are experiencing human interaction when typing on a keyboard and sending messages to virtual audiences, or that this student thinks he can have interaction by himself.

A visit to the WGU (http://www.wgu.edu) web site revealed the following information.

1. WGU is a real university, just without a physical campus. No walls. No limits.
2. We also have several exciting competency-based degree programs. Competencies are nothing more than skills or knowledge identified by professionals . . . as being essential for mastery of the field.
3. Tuition (lump sum rates):

Undergraduate certificates	$1250.00
AA degree	$2500.00
Post-bac. Certificates	$2500.00
Master's degrees	$3000.00

4. Modes of Delivery: Audiographics, Audio Tape, Cable Television, Computer Conferencing, Compact Disc, Real-time Chat, Desktop Video, E-mail, Fax, Home Satellite, Instructional Software, Postal Service, Broadcast Radio, CD-ROM, Satellite, Telephone Conferencing, Terrestrial Lines, Broadcast Television, Video tape and the World Wide Web.
5. Union: OK, it's not a student union in the usual sense. . . . WGU is creating the cyberspace equivalent of an advising center, financial aid office, and student lounge.

From this description of the virtual student and university, several questions emerge.

1. How does completing self-study modules and attaining desired levels of competency result in becoming educated?
2. What is the value of human interaction in teaching and advising?
3. Why hasn't the higher education community questioned the long-term consequences of awarding degrees online?
4. How will the commercialization and commodification of learning change the role of undergraduate and graduate education?

WGU certainly provides the opportunity to analyze the commercialization (e.g., variable lump sum rates for degree programs) and commodification (e.g., competency equivalents as measures of learning) of teaching and learning in higher education. But again, this process goes relatively unquestioned and blindly accepted. It could be argued that simply passing competency tests and completing independent projects has little to do with becoming educated. However, this may be an excellent means to gain training. And, given that many undergraduate and graduate students report that one of the more important and challenging experiences influencing their collegiate education was physically interacting, discussing, debating, and arguing about ideas with their peers and professors, WGU programs, as education, falls short.

Another example supporting this prostituting of education is seen in the soon-to-be-created Harcourt Internet University (Hechinger, 1999): "Harcourt is heading to cyberspace not only to sell its brand-name books but also to . . . [start] an Internet university and wants to become the first major publishing house to offer accredited college degrees" (p. B1). Harcourt CEO Richard Smith summarized his thinking about this endeavor, by stating, "We were in the distribution side. Now, the content side is where the opportunity is bubbling up" (p. B3). Again, the emphasis is on selling teaching and learning as a commodity, commercializing and profit making, and appealing to students as customers shopping for the best bargains, and not on becoming educated. Moreover, struggling with difficult concepts; demonstrating an interest to know and being intrigued by new thoughts; understanding the contextual nature and complexities of ideas; reading difficult texts; discussing and debating ideas with friends, classmates, and colleagues; and gaining satisfaction

from hard work are not emphasized, let alone mentioned. Winner (1997) richly describes this conclusion.

> The cost cutting and technological strategies . . . are accompanied by an ideological campaign that defines education as nothing more than a commodity for sale in the market at a competitive price. In this model what were once "students" are redefined as "customers." An arrangement of this kind shifts power away from teachers and towards purchasers. Seeing only short-term payoffs, seeking good value for money, "customers" of this sort often insist upon buying what amounts to neatly wrapped, narrowly defined increments of vocational training.
>
> The old-fashioned idea that education ought to cultivate the sensibilities (including moral sensibilities) of the "whole person" is, of course, the first casualty of this "stack 'em high, sell 'em cheap" approach to teaching and learning. (p. 3) The benefit that a good education provides is not a storehouse of knowledge to be bankrolled and then doled out. (p. 6)

Specific examples of the commercializing and commodifying of teaching and learning are becoming as much a part of the higher education culture as teaching and learning itself. EDCOM is a merged group of academic and corporate players that develops standardized courses and teaching materials developed by commercial production companies for purchase by universities (Noble, 1997).

In addition, three academic and corporate groups have been formed for purposes of developing and distributing online coursework. These include UCLA and the Home Education Network, UC Berkeley and America Online, and the University of Colorado and Real Education (Noble, 1998). Interestingly, the Real Education, Inc., has changed its name to eCollege to better reflect their interest in partnering with colleges and universities. They have really redefined the word *partnering* through their eCollege Course Program. This program offers 887 courses in more than 90 different content areas from 51 different higher education institutions. Currently, eCollege brokers 68 different degree programs: 1 doctorate degree, 27 master's degrees, 7 bachelor's degrees, 8 associate of arts degrees, 17 certificates, and 8 credentials (http://www.ecollege.com). Cisco is a company providing yet another corporate connection to higher education through the sale of software and hardware products and Internet networking. Through their Peachnet Community Network, Georgia State University has access to students across virtual environments. This network was designed to "add power, versatility and cost-effectiveness to the networks" (http://www.cisco.com). Becoming educated is not an outcome emerging from this type of slick academic packaging intended to turn a profit.

A visit to the Compaq web site details a variety of software, hardware, and technical services for sale. Of particular interest was the feature about Grove City College (GCC). The advertising message used to promote GCC was "Grove City College: They take their classes to go." Sounds much like a fast-food jingle, doesn't it? But, in reality, it may as well be, given the status of teaching and learning as a commercialized commodity. At GCC, all 2200 undergraduate students have timely and constant access to computers, Compaq of course.

The Compaq Information Technology Initiative ensures that students have computers in their college classrooms, laboratories, dorm rooms, and homes. Director of distribution, John Inman is quoted as saying, "The computers have become part of their bodies; they take them everywhere" (http://www.compaq.com).

Not to be outdone by the competition, Microsoft has implemented its own version of teaching and learning for sale, through a program titled "The Connected Learning Community: The Role of Technology in Education (http://www.microsoft.com)." In addition, Microsoft currently is considering providing certificates of completion for competency gained with Microsoft products at an institution called Microsoft University (NetAction, 1998). Bill Gates, writing a virtual letter from the Microsoft web page, suggested, "Higher education uses technology to prepare students for the increasingly technology workforce and to provide them with the skills for lifelong learning." The role of the university is seen serving "as the last gatekeepers of our newest members of the workforce." The goal of The Connected Learning Community is to provide learners with constant technology access: 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. Through this service, members would have the tools to better locate, evaluate, and use information. Matching Microsoft's claim for total access, IBM has introduced their 1999 Education Card. This program provides unlimited education and training for 1 year for only $4,995.00!

Although developed in direct response to the CSU-private sector merger, the following NetAction recom-

mendations could serve as guidelines for all higher education–private sector technology-based mergers.

1. There should be no corporate management of educational institutions by companies with a direct financial interest in the products purchased by the campuses or students.
2. Any outside management support should be committed to training students in a diversity of technologies and be committed to supporting open computer standards across the board.
3. Any proposal must include an explicit commitment to full and equal access to technology on campus regardless of economic ability to pay.
4. Educational curriculum should be designed by educators dedicated to the long-term interests of their students, not corporations looking to lock in "customers" to proprietary software.
5. No proposal should be approved without a thorough analysis of its possible impact of technology standards and monopolies outside the university.

Interestingly enough, when the efficacy of distance learning is examined, serious concerns emerge. Several concerns were raised in a 1999 report titled "What's the Difference? A Review of Contemporary Research on the Effectiveness of Distance Learning in Higher Education," published by The Institute for Higher Education Policy. These concerns included quality of access, required skills, costs, high dropout rates, quality of virtual resources, and learning styles. This report suggested the majority of studies that purport distance learning as effective as traditional learning is questionable (e.g., not using random samples, not controlling for demographic variables), due to the poor quality of research making up these studies. This report "urges officials to consider the evidence carefully when making decisions about investment in the rapidly evolving field of distance education" (p. 1). It is troubling when large numbers of students enroll in distance learning courses and never finish, in spite of the distance learning mantra, "Access to higher education for all." What good is access if students do not complete courses and learn something?

The relationship of humanness and community building to learning is another important issue related to distance learning that is typically not part of the business model's bottom-line thinking. Although distance learning advocates clamor about the interactivity of online learning, sitting alone at a computer terminal and typing to a virtual audience is simply not an example of human interaction and community building. This clamoring is best captured in Brown's 1999 book, *Always in Touch: A Practical Guide to Ubiquitous Computing*. He stated, "The computer is the new 'great enabler' of community building, collaborating, teaming, sharing, and educating. The new conversations and the new communities are a hybrid of face-to-face contact and of keeping in touch 'virtually'" (p. 3). Brown quotes Robert Putnam, who suggests, "Suddenly, communities can be built and sustained without regard to geographic distance and without the necessity of 'simultaneous presence'" (p. 3). Given my experiences, I cannot imagine using phrases such as this to describe meaningful communities. I would suggest that Brown read what F. Scott Peck in *The Different Drum*, Mitch Albon in *Tuesdays With Morrie*, and Robert Fulghum in *From the Beginning to End: The Rituals of Our Lives* had to say about community building and living. And again, important questions remain unanswered: What are the consequences of awarding bachelor's, master's, or doctorate degree's online? How will these degree students think about the meaning and purpose of knowledge? Finally, now that some online universities are becoming accredited, the world of cyberspace learning may virtually explode. This reaction could signal an "open season" on teaching and learning in higher education.

I wonder what John Henry Neuman would think of this alleged transforming vision for higher education. In his 1910 article, "The Idea of University," he spoke of a different kind of place and a different kind of teaching and learning.

> the assemblage of strangers from all parts in one spot. . . . It is a school of knowledge of every kind, consisting of teachers and students from every quarter . . . a place for communication and circulation of thought. (p. 31)
> Mutual education . . . is one of the great and incessant occupations of human society. The general principles of any study you can learn by books [Internet] at home, but the detail, the colour, the tone, the air, the life which makes it live in us you must catch all these from those [who search for it, and] in whom it lives already. (p. 33)

If higher education is viewed as just another commercial industry, and teaching and learning sold as commodities to student customers with the most competitive bids, what will it mean to be educated, I mean

trained? This article ends as it began, with an advertisement that sadly captures many of the realities associated with the commercializing and commodifying of teaching and learning in higher education.

> It's not just business . . . it's your future. Is Higher Education for sale? You bet it is. And everyone—corporations, non-profits, government agencies—wants a piece of it. How should your institution respond? How do you take advantage of . . . Market-Driven Higher Education.

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