

REVIEWS

Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line: The Marketing of Higher Education by David L. Kirp. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, 336 pp., \$29.95 hardbound.

Alvin Kernan

The blurb for this book tells us that it is "essential reading for anyone interested in higher education," and indeed it is, but perhaps not in quite the exact way these words suggest. To traditionalists it will read as a detailed history of the strange transformation of higher education in America from a meritocracy to a market in which higher education is bought and sold. Of course we all know that the old system was imperfect, but it at least paid lip service to knowledge, not, whatever the rhetoric, to efficient management. Kirp understands, and it is one of the strengths of his book, that the numerous changes in higher education in recent years, whether it be affirmative action, politicization, or the decrease in the number of tenured faculty, are all parts of a broader shift to the values of the marketplace. And in America, who should expect anything else?

A battle at the University of Chicago in recent years offers a remarkable cross-section of what has been involved in this historical transition. Chicago, as everyone knows, was founded with Rockefeller money towards the end of the nineteenth century and structured to focus narrowly on the search for knowledge. The graduate school dominated, the undergraduate college was small and rigorous, athletics minimal, a place for study, not much fun. It was an admirable

plan, but graduate education turned out to be too expensive without lots of undergraduates paying high tuition and successful alumni giving generously to the "best old place of all." By the 1990s, undergraduate applications and acceptances were down. Sixty-two percent of applicants had to be admitted to fill even a small class, the endowment was suffering from inflation, and alumni giving was weak. A new president, an economist from Princeton, decided that radical change was necessary and proposed that a stiff liberal arts requirement, the core curriculum, be cut back in order to offer more attractive courses of study to a less rigorously chosen undergraduate body that was attracted with glitzy ads showing how much fun, of the right kind, you could have at Chicago.

The old guard tore the place apart in their defense of the core curriculum, and in time the new president resigned, the most hated man on campus; but in the end most of his program was put in practice, though the graduate program remained untouched. For those who argued for change there was no choice, the old-style Chicago was going out of business, but for those who defended it there were ways to retrench without cutting into the intellectual core. They fought hard because they perceived that not just a few course requirements were at stake but the fundamental educational philosophy that had built and nurtured the place.

Something like what happened at Chicago has occurred across America, and higher education has shifted from the research university paradigm to the marketplace of Adam Smith. Sometimes the change was easy. Beaver College was

about to go into bankruptcy until consultants discovered that the name had the wrong connotations in the late twentieth century and suggested that a name like Arcadia, suggesting cool countryside and peaceful life, could turn the tide. It did and now *Floreat Arcadia*—except that Latin coats of arms are out, replaced by college logos—with lots of applicants and lively campus life at the new student center.

David Kirp is, as I read him, of two minds about the change, as I suppose he would have to be if he hopes to attract many readers. On the one hand he often warns of the ridiculous excesses in what he brilliantly styles the “demi-monde of higher education,” and speaks of the disaster it would be were the “bottom line” to become the standard by which all education is measured. On the other hand, he relates, fully and zestfully, the artful ways in which modern entrepreneurs have saved dying universities, and it is not always possible to tell which side he is on, both probably. But he gives us extraordinarily full descriptions of remarkable changes across a wide spectrum of higher education. The book ought to be read just for the sheer amount of mind-boggling information it provides of the change, but Kirp’s admirable research and analysis pinpoints just what kind of changes financial practicality has brought to the campus. They are by no means all fiscal. Changes in demographics provide a good example of the ways in which bottom-line approaches have affected fundamental values at near and far remove.

Everybody goes to college now. Lots of students, but traditional education is labor-intensive—individual tutors even

at a few rich places. The obvious way of saving money has been to increase the size of classes and cut their number, while reducing the faculty. This has meant reduction of the tenured professors—making the survivors more amenable—and an increase of the untenured, off-the-ladder, part-time adjunct staff and the piece-work, pay-by-the-class faculty. At New York University, adjuncts were paid \$3,600 a semester course—in the Education School, only \$2,500.

Kirp tells us that between “1993 and 1998, 40 percent of all higher educational institutions reduced their full-time faculty, and 22 percent of those schools replaced them with part-timers” (86). This shift to part-time help has taken place everywhere. In 1970, only 22 percent of the total teaching faculty was part-time; by 1997, the percentage was 43. Off the tenure ladder, denied retirement and other benefits, paid by the teaching hours or the number of students, hired and fired as enrollments shift from one subject to another, part-time faculty are as expendable as Kleenex. Their temporary status denies them any role in governance, and their disposability has driven them and the graduate-student teachers to attempts to unionize and to the standard marketplace division between workers and management. It is hard to see that these feelings produce better education than did the old values of identification with the institution, fierce loyalty—often dreadfully exploited by crafty deans and treasurers—and a sense of professionalism.

New York University is particularly interesting in this regard, because its

downgrading of teachers was the means not to financial salvation but to raising its prestige. Like many universities, its perceived need was not so much money as status. A second-level school populated with Ivy-League rejects, a succession of ambitious presidents undertook to break into the academic first rank by hiring intellectuals with name recognition, offering high salaries and low teaching requirements—no undergraduates in most cases. Half of Harold Bloom was lured from his continuing Yale chair as a Sterling Professor of Humanities. Ronald Dworkin divides his time between Washington Square and Oxford. Denis Donoghue spends half the year in Dublin. Andrew Ross galloped up from Princeton to run Cultural Studies, the trendy field that is replacing literary studies. Carol Gilligan, Adam Przeworski, Russell Hardin, Paul Boghossian, and on and on. Duncan Rice, the dean who recruited these intellectual heavies, has since removed to Scotland, leaving NYU with what Kirp cleverly calls “Star Wars.” When a student lured by these stars, new dormitories, and the Big Apple arrives, he or she will, however, almost surely be taught by a graduate student in a department riven between the new “haves” and the old “have-not” profs.

Everybody, it appears from Kirp’s irreverent descriptions of the new universities, wants to get ahead, and this means that they have had to hire as presidents and deans charismatic managers who can raise money and sell bold new operational plans. These new men understand the power of positive advertising, total-return investment policies, legalism, and a host of new specialties that

have required many additions, at high salaries, of administrative staff. A harassment officer, of course, and probably an ombudsman, but the real power will lie with the vice president for “enrollment management,” who oversees not only the old dean of admissions but all aspects of attracting and retaining students, facilities, recruiting, brochures, tuition, scholarships, and curriculum.

Curriculum is a particularly sensitive subject, and Kirp substantiates teachers’ perception that business courses, justice programs, and computer “certification” have been the hands-on educational growth industries in recent years, while the more theoretical arts and sciences have been downers. “Content authenticators”—“those who create knowledge” like Microsoft—as opposed to the “distributors,” those we used to call teachers, have eliminated many of the traditional subjects and substituted trendy subjects that fill the classroom and overflow into TV viewing rooms. Brown has taken the new curriculum “about as far as it can go”

towards an undergraduate’s wish list. The reforms abolished all distribution requirements, cut the number of courses students needed to graduate, eschewed majors in favor of individually tailored concentrations, and allowed students to take all their courses on a pass-fail basis (23).

Grade inflation, which is an open scandal everywhere, pleases consumers who pay high tuitions, and conceals the general decline in knowledge measured by tests such as the GREs and the SATs. Many schools troubled with decreasing numbers of applicants and lowering scores have stopped requiring the tests

for admission altogether, Holyoke and Bowdoin, for example. The University of California is also considering the move. One of the most troubling features of the educational innovations is that they never call themselves by their true name but use some impenetrable pseudonym like “content authenticators,” or they offer themselves as intellectual improvements. Dropping the tests is presented not as an abandonment of a national standard of performance in language and numbers but by the explanation that they discriminate against minorities, that they encourage mere rote learning as opposed to real creative thinking, are judgmental, and so forth. Democratic capitalism abominates testing, grading, and comparison.

Once universities—universities are more prestigious than colleges—learned that any institution, no matter how humble, can lift itself by its own bootstraps, if it only hires the right entrepreneurs and packages its wares attractively enough, then the educational hierarchy begins to break down, and, as Kirp puts it,

the familiar boundaries separating the center from the periphery are blurring as, even at leading research universities the market-driven sector has been expanding. Whatever the issue—the composition of the student body and the faculty, the array of course offerings, the sources of money and the ways it gets spent, the—“outsourcing” of basic activities like teaching—what was once the harmonious and self-contained world of higher education is constantly being disrupted (224).

It is not just that NYU is leveraging its faculty to overtake Columbia, a more radical decentering is being engineered.

Instruction on television deconstructs the old image of wholeness—being complete in itself—a college sought. Things spread out, and online schools run close in size to Michigan. Proprietary schools like Phoenix, DeVry, Heald, and Unitek teach salable skills to more students than Harvard and Stanford, who are themselves expanding onto the Web, looking closely at the bottom line. Even the most prestigious and richest universities, who ought to be able to resist marketplace pressures, have taken up the sharp practices of the business model of higher education. Kirp offers many examples. One will do. Harvard kited its students’ SAT scores by 15 points in a report to *U.S. News & World Report* for its prestigious annual ranking of the best colleges. Everybody pooh-poohs these rankings but an improvement can double applications and make viable tuition increases of 10 percent.

I expect that most of the readers of *Academic Questions* will regard Kirp’s picture of higher education in the twenty-first century as a “real horror show.” But the new educators do not admit that a drastic and destructive change has taken place. The *sans culottes* of Sproul Plaza demonstrating for the “right” to use foul language in the 1960s never thought the changes they were initiating would eventuate in the bottom line university. Yet no one seems to mind very much. Everybody goes to college. Graduates in 2001 made \$2,243 for every thousand made by those without a degree. More women than men get degrees, the government loans the money to pay inflated tuitions, grades are so high that most students graduate with honors and Phi Beta Kappa has become a joke. Minor-

ity enrollments are increasing, and everybody has a lot of fun. It is so good in fact that if you complain that we have “thrown away a pearl richer than all our tribe” the answer will be that nothing was really lost and a lot was gained. Higher education has loosened up and become fairer, but intellectually nothing has changed. *Plus ça change*, says the cynic. Don’t believe it, and if you are tempted to agree, if only to avoid a row, read Kirp. *Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line*

is an invaluable, detailed record of just how higher education has, with little sense of what we were doing, wandered from a search for knowledge to a market where skills and information are bought and sold.

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A 4 March 2004 article titled “No-Brainer College Basketball Exam Released” on worldnetdaily.com listed the following among questions taken from the final, and only, exam that Division I assistant basketball coach Jim Harrick Jr. had given in his Coaching Principles and Strategies of Basketball class in 2001 at the University of Georgia.

- How many halves are in a college basketball game? a. 1 b. 2 c. 3 d. 4
- How many quarters are in a high school basketball game? a. 1 b. 2 c. 3 d. 4
- How many points does a 3-point field goal account for in a Basketball Game? a. 1 b. 2 c. 3 d. 4
- In your opinion, who is the best Division I assistant coach in the country? a. Ron Jursa (sic) b. John Pelphrey c. Jim Harrick Jr. d. Steve Wojciechowski