

Distance Learning as Commercializing Higher Education

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Since computer-based learning can involve partnerships with for-profit organizations, be viewed as a route to increased revenue, and potentially be used to reduce labor expenses, it is naturally tied to what is often described as the commercialization of higher education, or what Slaughter and Leslie (1997) term “academic capitalism.”

Generally, commentators on the commercialization of higher education point to the following issues: technology used for exploitation and profit (personal and institutional), business-university partnerships, the rise of for-profit institutions, and a corporate administrative approach. One of the most visible critics of distance learning is David Noble, and his arguments are typical of critics of distance learning in America. In a broad sense, Noble (1997) sees the current fascination with distance learning as rooted in a belief in the “religion of technology.” He claims that university administrators are motivated to use distance learning in order to gain revenue for their institutions, and in some instances, for themselves.

Noble’s work is connected to a Marxist class analysis that views technology as a tool of dominance by the advantaged class over others. This viewpoint applied to distance learning leads to an understanding of technology use in higher education as a means toward the end of oppressing faculty and students. In *Technics and Civilization*, one of the first books to make this analysis, Mumford (1934) argues that the motivation for the use of machines is a compulsive urge toward mechanical development without regard to the outcome. Harold Innis (1972), a leading figure in the analysis of the political and historical impact of communication forms on civilization, argues that studying forms of communication offers possibilities to understand government and the rise and fall of empires in Western civilization. He sees changes in political forms coinciding with the adoption of new media.

Business-university partnerships are an obvious target for this kind of analysis, although the focus is usually on research in the sciences rather than distance learning. Nevertheless, distance learning is often tied to corporate partnerships through businesses providing software and hardware for the delivery of courses, and through marketing and course-development services. Changes in university patent policies in the 1970s helped pave the way for cooperative relationships, and universities had a clear economic incentive to establish partnerships with businesses. According to Slaughter (1990), as businesses become more competitive and have slimmer profit margins, national and state capital is spent to meet business rather than social needs. Additionally, as education costs soared in the 1980s in America, many business groups aided by major foundations began to move for containment. University leaders see university-industry research partnerships as an alternative source of unrestricted funds for their institutions, particularly when they can make claims on the intellectual property produced.

Slaughter warns that the privatization of higher education transfers what was once part of the public domain to the private, and may be changing faculty’s role (Slaughter, 1990). Other important scholars such as Bok (1991) express concern that if the university is perceived as a commercial enterprise, then its stakeholders may change the nature of their relationship to the university for the worse. He is afraid that the traditional university desire to seek the truth and disseminate knowledge might be supplanted by the profit motive in the eyes of the public. Bok argues that as universities grow more aggressive in seeking funding, their image changes, making it harder to appear to be a nonprofit institution. Burton Clark (1998) sees more different types of students looking for a growing array of subjects at

universities. The government expects universities to do much more for society and, at the same time, is becoming an unreliable patron.

As well as noting that corporate-university partnerships are on the rise, for-profit institutions such as the University of Phoenix are gaining attention in the United States. Sperling, the founder of the University of Phoenix, sees a nontraditional graduate-student population of 880,000 as a primary reason for the development of proprietary educational models. Sperling and Tucker (1997) argue that the advantages of for-profit, adult-centered institutions are that they use less federal and state taxes, access private capital for start-up funds and expansion, operate from leased commercial office space, quickly respond to the market, have a more focused product, relate well to for-profit business, are close to the customer, and have a service orientation.

Bowie (1994) claims that the biggest problem may be that corporate-university partnerships may not work. University partnerships cannot be counted on to provide funding for universities—particularly not distance learning partnerships. In fact, they may end up costing universities money. Bowie cites information that only 1 in 10 of patented discoveries recover the money spent on filing the patent, one in 100 make between \$20,000 to \$50,000, and only 1 in 1,000 are major money makers. In the future, observers are likely to continue to watch the link between the use of technology in education and possible general trends toward market models in higher education (Berg, 2002).

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KEY TERMS

Academic Capitalism: Slaughter and Leslie (1997) coined this term to describe a shift by America higher education toward control by the business community.

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