Public/Private Partnerships: A Trojan Horse for Higher Education?

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During times of economic swoon, it is understandable when administrators attempt to find ways to cut costs and increase efficiency. During 2008, to find cheaper labor and cut-rate technical advice, businesses in the Information Technology sector worldwide spent in excess of $120 billion on outsourcing. As of yet, outsourcing has made minimal impact in higher education for two reasons. One, an institution's inherent value is inextricably tied to its reputation—campus facilities, the size of its libraries, composition of its faculty, research infrastructure, and the campus as an ongoing mecca of cultural, creative, and intellectual life. Two, a successful college experience is predicated on the quality of human interactions—faculty and student relationships, student-to-student interactions, active student involvement in the life of the mind. To "farm out" either of these *raison d'etre* would seem to undermine the very reasons that students choose to enroll at a particular institution—for the distinctiveness of the educational experience offered there.

A new kind of for-profit, educational model promises to alter the landscape of higher education by circumventing faculty and manipulating reputation. The model uses an institution's legitimacy as a kind of Trojan Horse to operate an assembly-line, no-frills program, that is run—not by faculty, but by cheap hires from the corporate office. In late 2008, two universities, Midwest University and Southern State College (pseudonyms are used to protect faculty from potential repercussions), were both approached by one of the private corporations operating in this arena, Post-secondary Options Provider (POP, also a pseudonym) with an offer that administrators found captivating, especially as explicated on a spreadsheet.

The contract offered by POP was clear enough—a guarantee of increased enrollments and higher income—in exchange for the right to exercise control over a graduate program. Using its success with reviving enrollments at a beleagured, POP-affiliated university in Texas as a centerpiece, POP's sales managers explained how an existing, low-profit, face-to-face master's degree could be transformed into a new, high-profit, online program that could capture new students both in and out of state quickly and at no additional cost to the institution. Administrators from Southern State College, whose enrollments had been in slow decline for a decade, needed no further prodding and, in 2008, signed an agreement with POP—without consulting faculty. Indeed, faculty at Southern State were not even notified until weeks after an agreement had already been signed.

Southern State College

An emergency meeting of Southern's faculty, which was called during the summer to announce the partnership, was led by POP employees who tried to sell the move to outsourcing as a canny response to a college in crisis—or rather, crises—of enrollment, profitability, faculty lines, and ongoing viability. Not only would POP save the college from financial collapse, the new program would be so economical that students from across the state (and eventually, the nation) would flock to the program by the thousands. The turnaround would not only save existing faculty jobs, it would fill college coffers with much-needed cash.

Eventually, details of POP's plan were unveiled. Under POP, faculty serve as "instructors of record," and design the curriculum, but responsibilities for course delivery and student evaluation fall to employees hired by POP, called "coaches." Because coaches might have limited knowledge of course content, assessments had to be quick and easy with little room for nuance. POP's plan actively discouraged students from contacting "instructors of record" (faculty); instead, students were supposed to interact exclusively with coaches who were to resolve all but the most intractable problems. All courses would be pre-packaged and offered to students at drastic discounts to standard rates of tuition.

When some faculty at Southern objected that the emphasis with the POP plan seemed to be on expediency rather than quality, POP staff reiterated that faculty would have “absolute control” of the redesign. In defining absolute control, POP staff noted that absolute control meant that faculty could make all decisions regarding instruction, assessment, and curriculum as long as it fit the model – a five-week, Internet-based program, capable of being easily evaluated by coaches, scalable to thousands of students, and with limited interaction between students and faculty. In other words, in the POP universe, *absolute* was a relative term.

During subsequent training sessions, faculty heard the term *high quality* continuously, though parts of the package that emerged seemed anathema to it. For example, one odd edict was that a coach’s grading time would be limited to a maximum of 10 minutes per graduate student per week. Obviously, student responses would have to be relatively short and simple if total grading time were limited to under a minute-and-a-half per day. Over time, it became clear that faculty assumptions about acceptable levels of quality and control were light years away from POP’s assumptions. For example, once the substantive redesign of courses commenced, faculty learned that absolute control had additional limitations, such as the following:

- No textbooks could be assigned;
- Readings had to involve less than 80 pages per week;
- Courses had to address exactly five major themes and consist of exactly five modules, one per week;
- Courses had to have 2-5 learning objectives for each week;

- Each assignment had to have an accompanying explicit grading rubric;
- A short, multiple choice quiz had to be given once per week;
- All mid-term and final exams had to consist of 20 multiple choice questions.

Midwest University

Shortly after POP signed Southern State to a deal, a proposal to partner with Midwest University, was presented to its faculty. The effort to partner with POP was spearheaded by the university's central administrators and faculty were given less than two weeks to respond to the proposal. Like faculty at Southern State College, Midwest University faculty had initial questions about quality, rigor, and control of the curriculum. Unlike faculty at Southern State, who were notified about the partnership only after the contract had been signed, faculty at Midwest had the luxury of time, albeit two weeks, so they began a series of aggressive investigations into POP.

Faculty at colleges who had previous experience with POP who were contacted confirmed that POP's 5-week, Internet-based modules were quick and easy for students, but faculty offered a litany of complaints, including lack of student contact; lack of clinical or lab experiences; low quality control; restrictions on readings, assignments, and tests; and the accelerated time frame for every course. One professor remarked, "They tell you that you have total control over the curriculum. What they do not tell you is that the curriculum must fit onto the head of a pin with some room left over for evaluation." After Midwest University faculty voted overwhelmingly against the proposed partnership, POP departed while issuing a warning that it would re-emerge as a competitor at a rival institution in a matter of months.

Implications for Faculty

Myriad ways exist to deal with a crisis, either real or imagined. At Southern State College, administrators responded quickly to a perceived crisis in enrollment by signing, without faculty input, an agreement that granted all legal authority for a corporation to use the college's name to sell its product. In contrast, faculty at Midwest University, who were only given two weeks to respond, quickly marshaled their forces to express disapproval at the prospect of such profiteering through academic outsourcing.

The attractiveness of public/private partnerships is obvious. If a corporation can provide services at lower prices by using a more efficient business model than universities traditionally do, it would seem appropriate to explore possibilities for such partnerships. Already on many campuses, food services, parking, and even residence halls have been outsourced, why not the academic programs themselves?

An argument might be made that many online programs today already utilize a version of academic outsourcing. After all, brick and mortar universities like Drake or Penn State have extensive online degree programs that have been highly subscribed for years. These programs may offer brochures featuring young, beautiful students sprawled on the bucolic lawns of idyllic campuses and photos of lively group discussions in oak-paneled libraries, but everyone knows going in that the degree is going to consist of long hours alone, sitting in front of a screen, pointing and clicking. Nevertheless, the expectation for students enrolled in Penn State's online program is that the prestige of the institution offers an assurance of quality that carries over from the main campus to the new, online format. Students expect the program to have the *imprimatur* of Penn State, but pared down to its academic essence, without the buzz, extracurricular activities, and physical beauty of the geographic headquarters in State College, Pennsylvania.

The new model of outsourcing as represented by POP challenges the implicit links among faculty, student, and institution. In the POP model, faculty never take roll, never meet students, never lead discussions, never issue grades. To those who ascribe to the aphorism that "teaching would be great, if only we could get rid of the students," POP's new wave of academic outsourcing may represent a dream come true.

Although POP may wrap-up its presentation as a gift, its model challenges some fundamental beliefs upon which higher education has been built—that faculty expertise matters, that relationships between students and faculty are paramount, that learning cannot be circumscribed (let alone drawn and quartered into neat 5-week blocks assessed via 20 multiple choice questions). An institution is still only as good as its faculty. When a Trojan Horse appears, administrators may want to keep in mind what happened to the city once the gates were left open.

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