

Greed in the Groves: Part I

By Ralph Nader

EDITOR'S NOTE: Higher education, assessed from a purely business point of view, appears vibrant. But seen from the broader perspective of what a democratic society needs to succeed, the picture changes. In this call to action from *Thought & Action's* first issue, Ralph Nader places his finger directly upon the waning pulse of American higher education. Any solution to the controversial issues of our time, Nader argues, rests on the will and determination of the thousands of progressive and thoughtful faculty. Nader's analysis from 16 years ago may hold equally true for today. Do the majority of faculty have the will and the commitment necessary to transform the profession in order to save it?

The aggressive spread of corporate priorities and mercantile values respects few boundaries in our society—and academic traditions and values are not among the few.

The corporate mentality views colleges and universities as valuable testing grounds for business-defined technologies, as valuable trade schools for corporate recruits, as valuable research centers for future corporate products, as valuable instruments for legitimizing corporate ethics, and as valuable terrain to possess in the drive

against challenging alternatives to corporatethink. For corporations, universities and colleges are facile mechanisms for converting tax-supported wealth into private profit, institutions vulnerable to reshaping through the cooptation of grants and deals.

Pressing the corporate model onto the university world jeopardizes the preservation of precious academic values as well as broader democratic rights. The corporate model concentrates power, restricts the production and application of knowledge, and increases uniform

*In 1984, when this article was first published, **Ralph Nader** was considered America's most famous and effective social critic. A celebrated muckraker, consumer crusader, and public defender, Nader had published well-documented criticisms of government and industry misconduct that had made a widespread impact on public policy. Time magazine had called him the "U.S.'s toughest customer." Nader's inspiration and example had galvanized a whole generation of consumer advocates, citizen activists, and public interest lawyers who, in turn, had established their own organizations throughout the country.*

behavior, self-censorship, and when needed outright suppression. Jefferson warned Americans about the “excesses of the monied interests” when he urged representative government. Higher education is another one of those crucial countervailing powers to the dominance of the “economic government.” Universities, as described in a recent Carnegie Foundation essay, perform “an integrative function, seeking appropriate responses to life’s most enduring questions, concerning themselves not just with information and knowledge, but with wisdom.”

Everywhere the generation of knowledge for the uses and enlightenment of humanity is slowed, stalled, or stopped by a business mentality unable to tolerate criticism or pause to consider alternative models for economic activity. The growing business regulation of government has pulled these two major social institutions into an unhealthy, tight convergence lubricated by government contracts, subsidies, and business campaign contributions. The overall result is the dissipation of accountability, untreated problems, and ever more serious risks. Our country has more problems than it deserves and more solutions than it uses. The unleashed desire for the unlimited acquisition of wealth skews all priorities.

Ensuring that knowledge and progressive principles *matter* in our society is an urgent necessity that

demands collaboration. The controversial issues of these turbulent times merit a systematic response from concerned faculty members working in concert. The talent, care, and potential exists among thousands of thoughtful and progressive faculty members at campuses throughout the nation. But, for the most part, these concerned people do not know one another.

There needs to be a mechanism that facilitates concerted action on serious matters among the members of this most significant but unconnected population. That at least is the conclusion I find inescapable after listening to hundreds of faculty members express their desire to wed knowledge to action and theory to practice. Again and again, on major issues from civil rights to the arms race, from Agent Orange to auto safety, from soil erosion to acid rain, from corporate monopoly to government violations of the law, from automation dislocation to the corporate looting of America, precious time passes with painful results to many people before knowledge is brought to bear on the misfortunes that afflict our nation.

With our support, a National Coalition for Universities in the Public Interest will begin this year to bring together thousands of Americans from higher education who want to make a difference with knowledge by making knowledge the difference between bewailing the present and shaping the future.■