Sacrilegious Changes in the Monastery

The Responsive University: Restructuring for High Performance

Edited by William G. Tierney
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Reviewed by Cynthia Fowler

Students as customers? Tenure as an ongoing performance contract for a teacher's entire career? Social partnerships between urban universities and local communities? These are but a few provocative issues that William G. Tierney's collection of essays addresses for higher education in the 21st century.

An easy and enjoyable read, this collection is, nonetheless, jarring and controversial. In fact, in his introduction, Tierney acknowledges three possible major criticisms of this work: the scope and selection of topics, the use of language or "fanciful concepts," and the potential charge of philistinism, "suggesting sacrilegious changes in the monastery."

The topics addressed are profoundly important to students, faculty, and administrators in higher education. For example, "Listening to the People We Serve" by Ellen Earle Chaffee discusses how viewing students as customers enables us to become more seriously involved in meeting their academic needs and helping them achieve their professional goals. She contends that a goal of "customer satisfaction" will not dilute academic quality or commitment to knowledge.

"Tenure Is Dead. Long Live Tenure" by William Tierney embraces the continuance of tenure but not as we know it. Peer evaluation, including post-tenure review, should be ongoing for the purpose of helping colleagues improve their teaching. Providing a historical perspective of how tenure has evolved in American education, Tierney argues for re-creating tenure through formative, as well as summative, assessment to ensure academic freedom.

"Forming New Social Partnerships" by Larry A. Braskamp and Jon F. Wergin describes the initiatives taken by the Chicago Public Schools and the University of Illinois at Chicago in launching a social partnership to use the resources of higher education, especially faculty, to improve learning in the local public schools. Braskamp and Wergin's report is candid and fair, reporting not only the satisfaction but also the disillusionment with the outcomes.

In "The Implications of the Changed Environment for Governance in Higher Education," Roger Benjamin and Steve Carroll

propose that the existing governance system be restructured because it "cannot effectively cope with the problem of reallocating resources."

The change in student demographics, the increasing demands for community services and societal-oriented research, escalating costs amid diminished public revenues—in short, changing demands and limited resources—have all had an impact on how a college or university allocates its resources.

Benjamin and Carroll argue for university-wide evaluation criteria that allow for comparison among the various departments in order to determine resource allocations. To do this effectively requires a new governance system that is "neither top-down nor bottom-up."

To win faculty support, the system must be "iterative; that is, the decision making needs to go both ways" with "multiple review mechanisms," recommendations from blue ribbon faculty committees and faculty task forces.

The final topic, "Achieving High Performance: The Policy Dimension" by Peter T. Ewell, deals with the relationship between higher education and public policy. Ewell asserts that higher education during the last decade has been suffering from a "crisis of confidence" in satisfying public needs. To enhance academic performance and satisfy the demand for outcomes, he argues for a new paradigm between schools and state policy makers.

Clearly, these topics span a spectrum of higher education concerns. Nevertheless, while it is impossible to include a comprehensive discussion of every major issue, there is one salient omission: the role of technology.

This slim volume could have been made only more engaging with the inclusion of a section on technology's impact on classroom practices, alternative instructional methods, research, and the generation of revenue.

In addition, some of the book's commentary may be utopian and controversial, such as Tierney's suggestion that administrators restructure their workday to become involved with formative assessment of faculty.

Some expectations may be regarded as extreme, such as Benjamin and Carroll's prediction that "deans and associate vice presidents will probably be eliminated over the next decade." But, despite Tierney's proviso, these ideas can hardly be dismissed as mere fancy or sacrilege.

One criticism that is valid is Chaffee's questionable language, specifically the use of the word *customer*. It is true that educators and administrators need to continue to provide service to students and that the perception of students as customers would emphasize this need, but the choice of words becomes a false analogy.

Students are, of course, customers, whose academic needs and career goals must be met. But students' responsibilities extend far beyond those that are associated with the word *customer*. Students are essentially neophyte professionals and scholars, and language describing them has to reflect that.

In addition, we need consensus about what the product is. Teachers see the product of their endeavors as acquisition and application of knowledge, with such skills as critical thinking ability and competence in oral and written language.

Students might agree in principle but too frequently insist on grades as the ultimate product.

Serious and conscientious students sometimes complain during student/teacher conferences that because they have invested so much time and effort into a course, they deserve better grades. Occasionally, students complain that because tuition is so expensive, they are entitled to better grades. The use of the term *customer* can potentially lend credence to such specious reasoning.

All in all, *The Responsive University* is more than an engaging, enjoyable read. It addresses profoundly significant and sensitive issues facing higher education.

Readers may challenge and disagree with many concepts presented in this collection, but there should be no criticism on the impressive scholarship offered here. ■

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