

Online Education: '76 Trombones and a Big Parade'

By J. Jeffrey Tillman

At a recent higher education conference, I felt as though I was in a performance of the Broadway show *The Music Man*. Infomercials, speeches, and advertisements were everywhere, praising online education. It was as though Professor Harold Hill was marching through the convention hall, exalting online education to the tune of "76 Trombones," and everyone crowded in to march with him.

I am certainly not against the use of technology in education, but I wonder if there are good educational reasons for the popularity of online education. Perhaps the same issues about education are at stake as are found in *The Music Man*.

Professor Hill is not strictly an educator. He is a salesman who creates a demand for a service that he offers. He gets what he wants, a fast profit, and River City supposedly gets what it wants, a boy's band and a feeling of pride. What Professor Hill might say, however,

is that education is at its heart a business relationship.

Many people connected with higher education would agree. A lot of money changes hands in the halls of academia today. Most of the institutions may be officially labeled as nonprofit, but the financial language of markets and profits still applies. Furthermore, without business to support higher education through grants to institutions and students and provide the overwhelming target for graduate employment, higher education would be destitute and, some would say, meaningless.

When this business model is applied to higher education, however, curious conclusions result. Students are the consumers and their wants must be met by the institution lest the student go somewhere else for the educational good or service. The central reason students seek out the institution, according to this model, is to increase their buying power by getting the cre-

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dentials to secure a more lucrative career. Because most vocations require the acquisition of discrete, technical skills peculiar to one industry or profession, institutions of higher education emphasize training in their curricula. Course offerings become ever more technical in nature, and many graduates at best know the specifics of a designated profession but perhaps little about the character of the present or past world as a whole.

Moreover, this business model suggests that institutions and professors may acceptably approach their educational activities with profit incentives. Institutions may focus their efforts on degrees and programs that generate the most enrollments, the best grants, and the largest endowments, and they should procure professors whose personalities and class requirements attract the most students.

Instructors may lower the requirements for their courses, given that they get the same pay for less effort and their students are more satisfied overall with fewer and easier assignments. Instructors may also depart from the traditional regimen of scantily compensated but diligent academic study and publishing in order to apply their newly found free time in the quest for personal profit.

Given that this is the approach of Professor Hill, what was wrong with it? Though he had somewhat ignoble motives as measured in a traditional sense, he did deliver on his promises.

The kids got the band instruments and the uniforms, and, in spite of the questionable character of his "Think Method" of music education, somehow learned to approximate a melody. The citizens of River City really did get what they paid for, and Professor Harold Hill was quite a likeable guy. Is that not enough?

The musical holds a tricky tension at this point. Professor Hill is clearly an inveterate shyster and a womanizer, and has few enduring relationships. He is the sort of fellow most of us would avoid. However, he can carry a rollicking tune, dance impressively, and gain the regard of a merry librarian. These traits tend to convince the audience to overlook his dark side.

The same is true of the prevailing business model. Much of its underlying conceptual structure comes from the realm of natural selection and Social Darwinism. This model offers a harsh and individualistic ethic in which self-interest and individual profit-seeking are the standards for practice.

Those who cannot compete in the marketplace are replaced by those who can. Because many

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Americans have benefited one way or another from the success of the business model, much of American society takes these stark virtues and rationalizes and sentimentalizes them into descriptions of innate justice and benevolence.

These rationalizations tend to hide the extent to which the business model can corrupt higher education. Institutions of higher education are virtually unique in their societal responsibility to oversee knowledge claims. They assist society in providing the resources enabling one to evaluate what is true and what is not by providing training for experts in various fields of inquiry and also by providing a place where knowledge experts can advance the fields of knowledge themselves.

Unfortunately, as the institutions become more dependent on business for support and the business paradigm for evaluation and program structure, the bias of business creeps in at every point, and it becomes ever more difficult to find a vantage point from which to criticize it.

If Professor Hill had an Internet connection, what would he do? He would quit riding the trains from town to town and would set up his own Web site, where students would be initiated into the fine art of the "Think Method" through dis-

cussion board interaction, E-mails, and streaming video clips.

Indeed, his approach to education seems tailor-made for current Internet technology. He might mourn the decline of his public singing and dancing, and his inability to woo personally young women across the states, but the expanded market and efficiency he enjoyed, along with the many online amorous relationships he could keep going at one time, would more than make up the difference.

Recent conversations about online education seem to presume that whatever problems it has must be new. But the problems that alarm me are not new ones. They are the problems associated with an impersonal and business-oriented paradigm of education, already entrenched, that has now found an explosive medium for proliferation. Indeed, *The Music Man* has gone online.

I am alarmed that higher education has so quickly and nonchalantly accepted the impersonal component of online education. Oh, I know the counter arguments. Many studies indicate that student satisfaction with online courses is generally the same as in class courses.

Apart from the convenience that appears to weigh heavily in such assessments, this judgment may just indicate how impersonal

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many traditional courses are.

If a class delivered traditionally is merely the delivery of old lectures that the students write down and later recite back on an exam, then that course is quite as “canned” as a course on videotape, delivered by mail, or streamed over the Internet. The problem is not with Internet technology but with the existing tendency to be satisfied with inferior education.

Staunch advocates of Internet courses often claim that their courses are highly interactive. A few institutions do invest in satellite uplinks to allow real-time interaction in sight and sound, but the great majority of online courses do not use that technology.

To justify their claims of high interactivity, many advocates point to discussion boards, E-mail correspondence, video clips, and chat rooms. Advocates claim that these mechanisms create a virtual, yet actual, academic community. But only a novice or disoriented computer user believes these claims entirely.

Operating a class by discussion boards and E-mail is like operating a class by voice mail. The maintenance of these tools can be a lot of work for both the student and the instructor, but they entail a kind of busy work that cannot achieve the highly personal interaction that is at the heart of quality education.

The video clips can be more helpful, but advocates fail to mention that the current technical limitations of computer speed, memory, and bandwidth make the streaming of more than a few clips, none more than about three minutes in length, prohibitive.

Real-time chat room capability is quite promising, although in my experience it still cannot achieve the same results as quality face-to-face interaction in the classroom because student participation is hard to encourage and monitor. And though chat rooms are extensively available, they are rarely used in online courses.

Apparently, convenience to the instructor and the student is the byword, and the issues of meeting together at a specific time, even virtually, are among the things that many want to avoid.

An avalanche of online courses in higher education seems inevitable. The financial stakes are so high that virtually all institutions of repute are offering online courses and seeking to expand their offerings. Unfortunately, student satisfaction and institutional financial solvency appear to be the operative measurements for quality. The time is critical to consider what might be being lost.

Does anyone expect the Julliard School of Music to offer online

courses any time soon? Probably not. Is it because it has enough funding that it doesn't have to follow the strict business model? Probably so. Is it because its instructors are amply paid and have little incentive to seek more money? Perhaps. Is it because most of its students are not ordinary consumers seeking greater buying power but have an intrinsic commitment to the study of their discipline? Very likely.

Or, is it that almost everyone, apart from Harold Hill perhaps, recognizes that current Internet courses, even at their best, present a barrier to the sort of interaction needed to achieve quali-

ty in performance art? I hope so.

There are some important things here for all of higher education to learn. Good business does not equal good education. Society needs higher education to operate by a different set of standards than business because values that should not be sacrificed to market-driven forces are at stake.

Merely reading a book, watching a videotape, or thinking really hard about a subject is not enough. One must be socialized into the community of knowledge to become truly educated, whether in music or anything else, and that seems to be something online education, more often than not, has a difficult time providing. ■

