



JOURNAL OF THE
RESEARCH CENTER FOR EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY

KENT STATE
UNIVERSITY

www.rcetj.org

Volume 1, Number 2
Summer 2005

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Book Review

The Future of Higher Education: Rhetoric, Reality, and the Risks of the Market **Frank Newman, Lara Couturier, Jamie Scurry** **San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004**

reviewed by
Rosemary Du Mont
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A recent headline in the Chronicle of Higher Education states "Today's Colleges Must be Market Smart and Mission Centered." The major theme of the article is that "there will be no return to a simpler era when market forces played a less dominant role in American higher education." That is a nutshell is also the major theme of the book under review: *The Future of Higher Education: Rhetoric, Reality, and the Risks of the Market*, by Frank Newman, Lara Couturier and Jamie Scurry. The results of an extensive four-year investigation conducted by the Futures Project at Brown University, this book looks at the major influences impacting higher education, focusing on the competitive nature of every aspect of university life: attracting students and faculty, obtaining research grants, winning athletic titles, generating revenue, and acquiring rankings and prestige. A major caveat frames the discussion: "if not skillfully structured by thoughtful and strategic interventions of government, the market and growing competition will distort the purposes of higher education and further widen the gap between rhetoric and reality" (p. 1).

Newman describes the two historical purposes of higher education: 1) safeguarding societal needs, "most notably the search for truth;" and 2) "creating a skilled and educated workforce." The book addresses both the opportunity and risk for those in higher education in responding to these two basic goals as they face what he characterizes as "the grip of transforming change." Changes highlighted include increasing competition among traditional institutions; rapid expansion of new for-profit and virtual institutions; technological approaches to teaching; globalization of colleges and universities; and the shift toward viewing higher education as a market, rather than a regulated public sector.

While the reader is led to believe that these transformations are causing unique new conflicts as those in higher education determine purposes and effectiveness of their institutions, the litany of changes and challenges presented caused me to look at a 1964 book *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, for which Richard Hofstadter won the Pulitzer Prize. Its focus is to say something about the historical conflict between the life of the mind in a society dominated by the ideal of practical success. He suggests that in America there has always been conflict between those who supported humanistic learning and those for whom contemplation was only useful if it could be transformed into practical intelligence. He quoted an orator at Yale, who in 1844 cheerfully proclaimed the end of humanistic learning for its own sake:

The age of philosophy has passed, and left few memorials of its existence. That of glory has vanished, and nothing but a painful tradition of human suffering remains. That of utility has commenced, and it requires little warmth of imagination to anticipate for it a reign lasting as time, and radiant with the wonders of unveiled nature.

Hofstadter shows that by the 1920's, the interest in linking higher education with utilitarian needs led to a shift in the nature of curriculum to develop more and more courses which "might interest and attract the

young.” The increasingly vocational character of American higher education was the result. This was supported by an abiding faith in technological progress as the way to develop industry and to cultivate “the money making faculty.”

We can look at Newman’s book through Hofstadter’s eyes. While some of the causes of the tension between values and mission and the marketplace may be unique to our time, the current debate over the purposes and nature of higher education as described in Newman’s book are part of a historical pattern.

Two other recent publications, released in 2005, compliment Newman’s book. The first, a book, entitled *Remaking the American University*, by Robert Zemsky, Gregory R. Wegner and William F. Massey, looks specifically at competition for students, referring to recruiting activities as an “admissions arms race.” It examines the purpose of higher education through the eyes of various groups of prospective students, focusing on the “fastest-growing group of purchasers in the higher education market”... who view colleges and universities “principally as providers of spot courses and skills.” The second is a report entitled *Online Distance Education Market Update: A Nascent Market Matures*, by Eduventures, an independent research firm. For that group of students who do purchase education one course at the time, distance education is a growing and significant option. Enrollment is expected to exceed 1 million students in 2005, representing a market of more than \$6 billion. Eduventures shows that what is driving this demand is the need for “easy access to quality higher-education programs” as well as a growing acceptance of technology to deliver “just-in-time, in-the-right place” educational opportunities.

Newman suggests that competitive circumstances such as those described in the above publications, are forcing higher education leaders to face three demanding tasks: 1) to respond to a worldwide higher education marketplace, driven by a growing virtual and for-profit higher education sector; by 2) constructing a “workable higher education system;” and 3) ensuring that the result for both the system and their institution is serving public purposes. The book suggests that university “gridlock” in the name of governance can mitigate against making the types of dramatic changes necessary to be responsive in the market driven environment.

Yet, the book ends on an optimistic note, stating that it is indeed possible to rebuild the compact between higher education and the public. Newman concludes that “there was never a period in which the opportunity for contributing to society has been as great as it is now.” He and his colleagues call on leaders of colleges and universities to clarify and enhance the public purposes of higher education, stating that this is not the time to stand on the sidelines to see how things turn out. Taking the responsibility for focusing on mission by making appropriate changes in response to market forces as well as by providing social benefits, is identified as the major task facing higher education leaders in the 21st century.

And they see technology as having a major role to play in creating strategies for the new era :
“Technology will open new possibilities for extending the university’s reach and improving the capacity to teach and research.” The book ends with this observation :

...technology is no respecter of tradition as to how organizations are organized. New forms of pedagogy are emerging. We will no doubt have to face the possibility of fundamental changes in what a university or college looks like.

This book provides a thoughtful look at those forces impacting higher education today. It is recommended reading for all those working toward creating an effective balance between being market driven and serving the public need.

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