Reaction and Response

More on the Pseudouniversity and Its Consequences

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This is a follow-up to the exchange in *International Higher Education* between Altbach (fall 2001) and Levy (winter 2002) on the pseudouniversity. Altbach argues that it is time to find a new way to refer to and accredit the mixed bag of institutions calling themselves universities. He especially wants those "pseudos," operating for profit who vocationally "train" students to be renamed, thereby preserving the title of university for those that "teach, do research, and serve the public good." Levy notes that many universities in the world do not meet the standards Altbach sets for them and that it is extremely complex to establish definitions and characteristics to differentiate them.

While I agree with much that was said by both authors, I think they overlook another dimension of the differences—namely that the traditional university is being challenged and changed by the pseudos and in some ways the two are not looking so different.

Neither author mentions explicitly the students or the teaching/learning (not just teaching) process. In the 1980s, arguments against the most visible of the pseudos, the University of Phoenix, were not focused on the faculty, research, or services of the institution. Instead, criticism was leveled at what Altbach might call the emphasis on training and the lack of attention to the educational process—that is, what constitutes a legitimate campus learning context and on-campus learning experiences for students.

But the concern with time-on-campus has overshadowed the need to focus on what happens to students during that time—their access to and the size of classes, their time with tenure-track faculty, their satisfaction with class schedules, and their receipt of academic advising. These are the areas where the pseudos are most competitive and where the traditional universities are being challenged.

A second challenge concerns accreditation. Educational *outcomes*, rather than educational *processes* explain the accreditation of Phoenix in the mid-1980s. Once accredited, credentials from Phoenix gained credibility, and learning outcomes and accountability became the dominant indicators for all postsecondary accreditation—including the accreditation of traditional universities.

An additional challenge is associated with the curriculum. The pseudos typically focus on, and standardize, a few subject areas. They then train faculty to teach the material and deliver the core curriculum when and where the students—rather than faculty—want it. This is in contrast to traditional university curricula where the courses offered—often as a result of faculty interests—grow and never seem to diminish.

The curriculum in the pseudos is also tailored to meet licensure, credentialing, and the broader needs of the marketplace—certainly a public good—something that traditional academics in the arts and sciences continue to believe is a "sell-out" to corporatism. While many traditional universities don't like the vocational emphasis of the pseudos, student preference is for coordinating knowledge and skills with the opportunity structure.

An additional challenge involves the faculty who teach at the two types of institutions. Most traditional universities seek to have at least a majority of faculty on the tenure track and thus limit their dependence on graduate students and part-time lecturers. In reality, many traditional universities are becoming more dependent on the latter for teaching lower-division and major introductory courses and are concerned with growing unionization and the accompanying employment issues. The pseudos rely primarily on part-timers—usually the same part-timers as the traditional universities. Thus, while it may be the ratio of tenure-track faculty to part-time faculty that distinguishes institutional types, it is not the specific faculty per se who can be used to make such differentiations.

"Profit making" is also not a distinguishing feature between universities and the pseudos. If a traditional university can make money on its "business" of teaching, research, and service, it does so. Because of dwindling financial support, however, it often finds it difficult just to balance its books. Associated with funding there are often conflicts between policies designed, for example, to keep students enrolled and paying fees as opposed to expediting their graduation. Fiscal constraints often require skimping on support for things like advising and remediation, and offering faculty-sponsored electives or small seminars.

In sum, whether we like it or not, the issue may not be what to call an institution that does not present a traditional appearance. Instead, the broader question may be how and whether to sustain what has made the traditional ones the standard bearers, in the face of the challenges posed by the others.

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