

universities. The less-prepared and lower-income students are left to find ways to pay for a private education. An unanticipated consequence of the market in the United States, where tuition is nearly always charged, is that financial aid originally designed to boost participation of low-income students has been twisted into a competitive tool. Financial aid is now widely used as an incentive to attract the “best” students, with less focus on financial need.

What Must Be Done?

New policies, if thoughtfully constructed, can provide the necessary balance between taking advantage of the opportunities of the market while simultaneously controlling the threats. The Futures Project is investigating policies that address the degree to which universities are free to compete in the market, the availability of good information about universities for students, and how to improve preparation and financial aid to ensure success for a broader portion of the population. Academic leaders and policymakers need to come to an agreement about what is needed from higher education and then renew the compact between higher education and the society it serves. Then, via policy, it is possible to ensure that the private interests pushed by the market are working for higher education, and higher education is working for the public. ■

For-Profit and Traditional Institutions: A Comparison

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The fastest-growing sector among the 3,500-plus U.S. institutions of higher education is for-profit education. Three years ago, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that in the previous five years for-profit education had “been transformed from a sleepy sector of the economy, best-known for mom-and-pop trade schools, to a \$3.5 billion-a-year business that is increasingly dominated by companies building regional and even national franchises.”

In summer 2000 the highly publicized University of Phoenix had 68,000 working professionals enrolled in undergraduate, graduate, and certificate programs around the world, 85 campuses and learning centers in the United States, Puerto Rico, and British Columbia, and was exploring campuses in the Netherlands, Germany, and elsewhere in Europe and Asia.

At the heart of the University of Phoenix’s success are a sharp, narrow definition of objectives and a highly systematic educational and business plan, characteristics not often associated with nonprofit higher education. I thought it would be interesting to ask how Phoenix, and by extension for-profit institutions generally, differ from traditional colleges. I realize that colleges and universities worldwide fall along numerous points on the traditional college spectrum and that the comparison for a particular institution would need to be adjusted accordingly.

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Focus

The University of Phoenix concentrates on one slice of the higher education pie: adults working full time, at least 27 years of age, who have established career goals. To serve this population, Phoenix course goals are tactical rather than strategic, focusing on the knowledge and skills that have immediate payoff—the competencies their customers need right now for their next career move.

The traditional college usually targets a younger age group, encourages full-time study, discourages full-time employment, and offers a college experience that includes myriad educational, extracurricular, artistic, social, and athletic programs to stimulate growth both inside and outside the classroom. The broad goal is a liberal education, an experience that seeks to free the students from prejudice and ignorance by confronting them with fundamental human questions, exploring differing responses to these questions, insisting that students develop their own positions, and challenging them to figure out how to live “the good life.” Both the students and their anxious parents trust that this broad education will eventually lead to gainful employment.

Metaphors

Colleges are both educational corporations and communities of scholars. As corporate entities, they depend on expertise in finance, higher education law, accreditation, marketing, customer relations, and other areas, to survive in an increasingly competitive environment. The concepts of higher education as an “industry” and students as “customers” are relatively recent developments. The University of Phoenix modus operandi fits easily into this concept—as a corporate member of the over \$200 billion industry that delivers education and training services to consumers at an affordable price. In con-

trast, the traditional college avoids thinking and talking about itself as a corporate entity and emphasizes the community of scholars metaphor. In this traditional view, the university is a “sacred” institution with a special societal mission; and students are not customers but colearners with or apprentices to faculty in the communication and discovery of knowledge.

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Faculty

One of the most interesting facets of the Phoenix model is its “unbundling” of the teaching role. In the traditional college, the faculty member, like a craftsman in a cottage industry, is the knowledge expert, the course designer, the presenter, and the evaluator. The unique talents and creativity of individual faculty members are prized. On the reverse side of this same coin, the traditional college may produce inconsistent results or quality variations precisely because of the uneven talents of individual teachers. Phoenix avoids or dramatically reduces this variability by separating faculty functions: content and curriculum experts design the course objectives and materials; practitioners deliver the course, adding their real world insights; and evaluation experts, rather than the instructors, design course assessments. The Phoenix model emphasizes rational design, consistency, and continuous improvement, and minimizes the input of individual faculty members, except in the delivery phase.

Traditional college faculty members are members of departmental, school, and university communities that provide a professional context not only for their own growth but also for the development of their disciplines. In the Phoenix model, the classroom instructors are individual contractors, technicians implementing and supplementing a preset instructional design, with a focus on delivery rather than the discovery of new knowledge.

Students

As noted above, the Phoenix model views the student as a consumer seeking a business-like relationship that will deliver the skills and competencies he or she wants. The connotations that come with the word *consumer* or

customer are quite different from those of *student*. The student-faculty relationship is viewed as a helping relationship in which the student feels that the faculty member has his or her best interest at heart. Teaching has traditionally been regarded as a vocation not unlike the that of a doctor or clergyman. The concept of customer or consumer, on the other hand, symbolizes a relationship in which the provider’s ultimate concern is the bottom line. This is not to suggest that Phoenix does not aim at first-rate service and consumer satisfaction, but that the ultimate motivation for these intermediary goals is the profitable growth of the corporation.

Knowledge

Phoenix views the traditional college as providing a “just in case” education—a broad liberal education described above in which most student learning is not related to an immediate objective or application. Statements like preparation for life or citizenship or development of the whole person symbolize the often intuitive but rather vague goals of the traditional institution. A Phoenix education, on the other hand, is a “just in time” experience: the student learns just what he or she needs and can apply immediately, predominately in a career setting.

Investments/Organization

The for-profit college invests in the development of a content, pedagogy, delivery, and assessment system that produces efficiently career-oriented competencies. The traditional college makes major infrastructure investments in libraries, classrooms, athletic facilities, theaters, laboratories, dining facilities, residences, student unions, and infirmaries, among other things.

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Educational Model

The traditional college operates on a scholarly discipline model where the disciplines are the context for conveying the cultural heritage, for posing the questions that have perplexed humankind over the ages, for engendering new questions, and for teaching the methods of disciplinary inquiry. Students interact with the best ideas and minds, both historical and contemporary. The Phoenix model, on the other hand, has a more behaviorist starting point focusing on the competencies that the student needs and the most efficient and effective ways to develop these outcomes in the student. These different starting points, perhaps more than any of the other differences noted above, illustrate the contrast between the goals of the University of Phoenix and a traditional institution.

Conclusion

I proposed that by comparing the University of Phoenix to a traditional college, we could learn something about both. The sharp focus and efficient organization of the Phoenix plan are impressive. The intent is not to displace traditional colleges but to target its systems-oriented, highly efficient approach to a narrowly defined segment of the population that it regards as underserved. By providing good service in its just-in-time mode, it helps its consumers in their careers and simultaneously makes a profit.

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This narrow, pragmatic focus is in sharp contrast to the world of traditional higher education with its lofty and expansive mission statements, its complex sense of obligation and service to society, and its commitment, albeit often vague, to a liberally educated populace. As the analysis above suggests, the for-profit approach is a very different model, not only in its exclusive focus on career-oriented students, but also in its instructional design, in its unbundling of the traditional faculty role, in its education industry orientation, in its emphasis on students as consumers, and in its corporate rather than academic organizational structure. For-profits do not want to emulate traditional colleges and, except for some institutions with profit-making adult career education as part of their portfolios, likely pose little threat. But by implementing a model that proposes to be higher education while at the same time leaving out most of the assumptions and goals that traditional higher education holds dear, they challenge traditional colleges and universities to reexamine how committed and effective they are in maintaining those assumptions and achieving those goals. ■

Quality Assurance Initiatives in Thailand

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Major efforts are currently under way to implement a new quality assurance system in Thailand for both public and private sectors of higher education. These efforts have followed passage of the 1999 National Education Act, which required the establishment of a new formal educational standards and quality assurance system for the whole education sector.

These efforts in Thailand parallel similar developments in a number of other countries throughout the Asia Pacific region. Within the region, governments are increasingly recognizing the importance of the standards of academic and professional qualifications in the new era of globalization and increased international competitiveness. They also see the need for new efforts to ensure that courses meet both employer and student needs, as well as securing wider international recognition.

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Thailand has a large and comprehensive higher education system, comprising both public and private sectors and both degree-granting and subdegree institutions. At present, higher education is under the control or supervision of 10 different ministries. Currently, there are some 645 institutions, not counting branch campuses. A total of 74 institutions are under the Ministry of University Affairs (MUA), 489 under the Ministry of Education (MOE), and 82 specialized institutions under other ministries. Under the control and supervision of the MUA are 20 regular public universities, 4 autonomous public universities, and 50 private universities. Institutions under the MOE include 36 *rajabhats*.

In 2000, the higher education system had a total of 1,639,149 students studying in institutions classified as degree-level institutions, of whom 29 percent were studying at degree level. Nearly one-quarter of the higher