

International Issues

The Rise of the Pseudouniversities

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An array of institutions, agencies, corporations, and other businesses are calling themselves universities these days. It is time to call a halt to this trend, which is debasing the nomenclature of knowledge and scholarship. Just as important, these institutions are, in many cases, providing “degrees” to people who have not studied in a university and who have not earned the academic titles. I refer here to a wide variety of organizations—including the University of Phoenix, which is now America’s largest private “university” and is accredited to offer academic degrees; Jones International University, the first U.S.-based Internet-only “university,” also accredited; Cardean University, which is part of U-Next (a company with links to Stanford, Columbia and other major universities), and “packages” courses for Internet delivery, and offers degrees in several professional fields; Motorola University, which is owned by a major corporation and offers training to employees as well as outsiders; and a variety of others. These examples are all in the for-profit sector, as are most of the new pseudouniversities, but the issue of for-profit versus nonprofit status is not the critical factor here.

These new pseudouniversities are not universities. They may offer valuable training in fields that appeal to eager customers. They may provide this training in “classes” taught by teachers in a “site-based” traditional format, provide instruction through the Internet or other new distance arrangements, or perhaps use a combination of modes of delivery. They may employ well-qualified instructors, although seldom on a full-time basis. But they do not fit the definition of a university and should not bear this title. The time has come to scrutinize the role of this new phenomenon in the universe of postsecondary education. The issue here is not the value or usefulness of the new providers of training but rather protecting one of society’s most valuable institutions—the university.

What is a University?

Defining a university is not an easy task, especially in this era of differentiation in higher education, with new and diverse institutions emerging everywhere. However, we can probably agree on a set of common functions and values. Universities, from their medieval beginnings, have been teaching institutions, encompassing most of the disciplines known at the time. Universities have been imbued with a sense of responsibility for the public good—be it preserving books in libraries, sponsoring art museums, or service

to local communities—and have seen themselves as independent places of teaching and analysis. For almost two centuries, research, especially basic research, has been a key function of a university. Professors—often, but not always, with long-term or permanent appointments—have been at the heart of the university, exercising control over the curriculum, the admission of students, and the awarding of degrees. Universities are normally expected to offer undergraduate, graduate, and professional degrees in a variety of disciplines and fields.

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Contemporary universities are themselves varied. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology does not call itself a university, but is one in every sense of the word. Boston College, despite its name, is a university because it offers graduate and professional degrees in many fields. Rockefeller University, a small institution that specializes in graduate training and research in the biomedical fields, calls itself a university, but might be overly specialized to warrant the title, despite its quality and reputation. Universities can be publicly owned and receive their funds largely from the government, or they can be privately controlled and responsible for their own budgets. Some are managed by religious organizations. In some countries, universities are managed by families. And there are a small number of for-profit universities, for example in the Philippines.

The Pseudouniversities

In the past several decades, an entirely new model of postsecondary institution has arrived on the scene. These new institutions do not fit the description of universities, but instead offer specialized training in a variety of areas that are in demand.

For the most part, they are for-profit entities, seeking to earn money for their owners or shareholders. Many are now corporations listed on the stock exchange. Some companies—such as the Apollo Group, which owns the University of Phoenix, and Sylvan Learning Systems—are mainly in the education business. Others, including IBM and the multinational publisher Elsevier (which now owns part of Harcourt General) are large media conglomerates or technology companies with an interest in education. Some have done quite well in the stock markets. Unlike

universities, these new institutions have as their primary goal earning a profit.

The pseudouniversities are highly specialized institutions. They do not offer programs in a wide range of subjects but rather focus on targeted, market-driven fields, and have the ability to shift focus based on student demand. So far, management and business studies, information technology, and some areas of teacher training and educational administration have been the most appealing fields. The chosen areas are those in which low-cost instruction can be offered without the need for expensive laboratory equipment. The curriculum is also subject to change. If demand falls off in one area, another can quickly be substituted.

The pseudouniversities have no permanent faculty and are staffed by managers who make decisions about both the business and the curricular aspects of the institution. Instructors are hired to provide instruction, develop web-based modules, and ensure that customers are served. Costs are kept low by hiring instructors to teach specific courses. Benefits are generally not available, and there is no commitment by the institution to those offering the instruction. Instructors lack academic freedom in the traditional sense of that term—they are hired to teach a specific content and cannot stray from it. There is absolutely no protection for teachers who might express divergent views or disagree with institutional directions or management decisions.

In the traditional universities, the concept of shared governance means the academic staff has a significant role in decision making about the institution. In pseudouniversities, there is no shared governance at all but simply management. Managers make the key decisions, with subject matter specialists brought in to develop degree structures. Power is entirely in the hands of management.

Pseudouniversities have no interest in research. Indeed, research would detract from the profit-oriented mission of the institution. It would be impossible to foster research activity with part-time instructors, scant library or laboratory resources, and no sense of academic autonomy. These institutions have no commitment to the broader public interest or the idea of service to society. Traditional universities have stressed service as a key responsibility, and both the institutions and their faculties engage in many different kinds of pro bono work. The pseudouniversities are specialized profit-making machines.

Is There a Problem?

Our purpose is not to advocate the abolition of this trend in higher education. The for-profit education sector, well established in the United States and in many other countries, is simply taking advantage of the increasingly competitive nature of education markets and the demand for specialized training in knowledge-based societies. It is, however, necessary to label these institutions correctly—

not just to ensure “truth in packaging,” but more importantly to protect the traditional universities and their critically central functions in modern society. This is no mere semantic quibble—it goes to the heart of the future of higher education.

Institutions that are not universities should not call themselves universities. They should not be permitted to offer what purport to be academic degrees. They should be accredited but not by the accrediting agencies responsible for traditional universities. In other words, these institutions should be in a clearly defined category of training institutions, clearly labeled and delineated. Customers, formerly called students, should be aware that when they are attending colleges and universities that they are studying at institutions with a set of understood norms and values, but that when they purchase a specialized training course, they are studying at an entirely different kind of institution. The qualifications earned at the new-style institutions should not be called degrees, but rather given other designations such as certificates of competency.

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At the same time, traditional universities must think carefully about their own missions and programs in the competitive environment of the 21st century. The tendency of academic institutions to “spin off” for-profit subsidiaries, or join consortia aimed at producing a profit, and focus increasingly on applied research aimed at bringing revenues rather than contributing to the advancement of knowledge—these are all in urgent need of examination.

For a start, let’s call a rose by its proper name. The new for-profit “universities” should be forced to change their names to something more appropriate. For example, the University of Phoenix should be called the Phoenix Specialized Training Institute (PSTI), offering a range of “professional competency certificates.” Motorola University should be the Motorola Corporate Training Institute. An entirely new accrediting structure should be set up to ensure that quality is offered to customers. If these steps are taken, universities will remain universities. Their focus on teaching, research, and service will remain intact. If we allow the pseudouniversities to proliferate willy-nilly, higher education will be debased and subject to ever increasing competitive pressures that will inevitably destroy one of society’s most valuable institutions.