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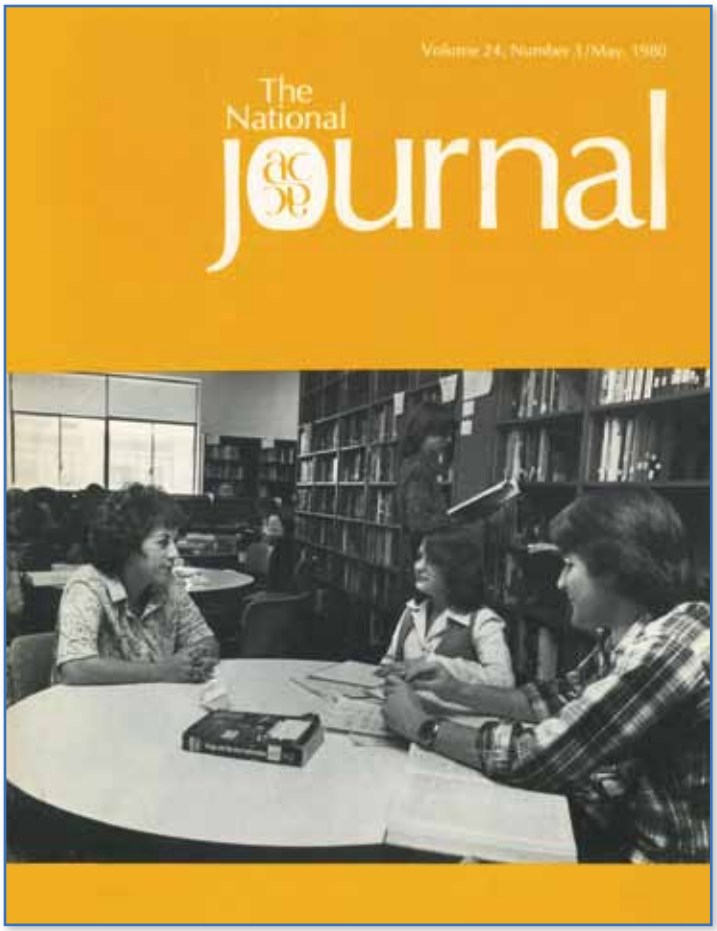
by John R. Silber

Marketing Higher Education: The Survival Value of Integrity

Response: "The Business of Education" by Michael Barron on page 45



As academics, we are all used to the idea that we have special ethical obligations. We may also, as administrators, recognize special administrative ethical obligations. But we do not like to think of ourselves as businessmen, concerned with selling, and few of us indeed have thought directly and hard about the ethical constraints on marketing in higher education; that is, about marketing ethics.

From 1980: **DR. JOHN R. SILBER** is President of Boston University. His views on equal opportunity, academic standards, and financing in higher education have attracted wide attention in educational circles. He has served as a member of the Board of the National Humanities Faculty and is now a member of the Executive Board of the National Humanities Institute. Dr. Silber's educational background includes the B.A. summa cum laude from Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas; M.A. and Ph.D. from Yale University. He also attended Northwestern University, Yale Divinity School, and the law School of The University of Texas.

This article was originally a speech delivered at the session entitled "Competition for Students—The Marketing Issue" at the Annual Meeting of the American Council on Education in Houston, Texas, November 1, 1979.

The title of this session—"Competition for Students—The Marketing Issue"—reflects a laudable willingness on the part of ACE to concede that we are, after all, businessmen and that our business is producing and selling education. We are a business with very different standards and procedures from others, and our product is intangible and hard to identify, but these facts do not obscure the important reality that our institutions are, *interalia*, businesses, and as such our operations include marketing as an essential part.

These ideas, however obvious, are still perceived by us as alien and repugnant. As academics, we are all used to the idea that we have special ethical obligations. We may also, as administrators, recognize special administrative ethical obligations. But we do not like to think of ourselves as businessmen, concerned with selling, and few of us indeed have thought directly and hard about the ethical constraints on marketing in higher education; that is, about marketing ethics.

We may be like the eminent and very deaf British philosopher who was button holed after one of his lectures by an American who identified himself by saying:

"I am a Professor of Business Ethics."

"I'm sorry," said the great man, "but I don't hear very well on this side. Would you mind repeating that?"

"I am a Professor of Business Ethics."

"I really am most fearfully sorry," the philosopher said. I *am* rather deaf. Would you mind saying that again?"

Substantially louder, the American repeated his name, rank and serial number.

"Oh, this is most embarrassing," came the reply. "Could I trouble you just once more?" And with that he produced an enormous ear trumpet.

"I am," the American bellowed into the trumpet, "a Professor of Business Ethics!"

"Oh, good heavens! So that's it!" said the philosopher. "You'll think me quite foolish, but do you know, I actually thought you kept saying you were a Professor of Business Ethics!"

Marketing ethics in its most obvious sense deals with avoiding conviction under the fraud statutes; even in the unlikely event that any of our members has any need for advice about this, the ACE surely has no special competence in this area. We are not, after all, in criminal practice.

In another sense, marketing ethics deal with avoiding the dubiously legitimized dishonesties of some commercial advertising, and we should hope that the institutions in ACE are supplied with the qualities of intellect and character that keep them, between annual meetings, on the narrow path here as well.

As teachers and administrators, however, we must meet a substantially higher standard than that. Other speakers at this session have dealt with our special ethical obligations not to oversell our institutions relative to others and to deliver on the fundamentals of what we offer; these are ethical problems implicit in most marketing, although they are often joyously ignored.

Higher Education or Postsecondary Education?

I want to discuss a series of ethical problems in marketing higher education that are less obvious but no less real and perhaps more compelling. Our first obligation, it seems to me, as businessmen in higher education, is to ensure that what we sell is really higher education. You will notice that I said "higher education" rather than "postsecondary education."

The minimum standards for purveyors of postsecondary education are some what laxer than for those of higher education, which is probably why the phrase is gaining currency. When you get into postsecondary education, either as a provider or a consumer, you are spared having to answer that embarrassing question "higher than what?" There is, for those who have no answer, a certain honesty in declining the use of the term "higher education," but I presume that the members of the ACE, whatever the numerologists of NCES may do with terminology, are willingly involved in the business of higher, rather than post secondary, education.

Higher education is infinitely complex and elusive, but I presume we can all agree that it must ultimately depend on an interaction between a person to be educated and a system for educating him or her.

Role of Admissions Office in Higher Education

This fact presents us with our first dilemma, the one that resides in the admissions office. We must ask ourselves whether absolutely everyone can plausibly avail herself or himself of higher education, and if the answer is "No," devise a responsible system of screening those who cannot buy our product no matter how much and how often they pay for it in coin and in sweat.

This is not to suggest that I oppose open admissions: I should make it clear that I have no objection to that trend in itself. It does not greatly matter at what level a student is admitted to college, provided that he does not receive college credit until he can do college level work and provided he is not graduated until he reaches a level of accomplishment that is equivalent to four years of college study.

It may be just as well to admit unprepared students freely and provide remedial work to qualify them for college studies; such a policy would have the decided advantage of not denying any one educational opportunity. It would put an end to the surreptitious use of racial criteria in the admissions process.

But at minimum we should be prepared to warn those students whose prognosis is ultimately grim, "Travel At Your Own Risk." One of the greatest moments in the lives of teachers and schools is when such a student triumphantly proves the experts wrong and finishes the course. However, unless we are to be callous and sadistic, we should not encourage applications from those who are almost certain to end in utter failure.

Open Admissions and Possible Consequences

But within the next decade we may have not only open admissions but also open graduation. At that point "post secondary education" will probably replace "higher education" altogether. At long last what we do may not be higher than anything.

The American public will not, in my opinion, stand still for this. Already they show an increasing reluctance to send their children to college because they are beginning to ask if the people who will be responsible for their children's education are good enough to be worth the price. The movement toward open admission, open promotion, and open graduation will increase public disillusionment, and the public's reaction could be swift and devastating.

But let us make the optimistic assumption that we resolve the coming demographic crisis with an admissions policy such that we offer higher education only to those who have some minimal chance of achieving it, and a retention policy that makes graduation something less than automatic. We are left with the far thornier ethical problem of ensuring that what we offer our students has an optimum chance of affording them higher education.

From Content to Methodology: The Leeching of the Curriculum

We have, I trust, passed out of the mad period when higher education was being defined as whatever it was that a student wanted to do for the first four years or so after high school. The most unfortunate hangover from that time is our widespread abandoning of the foreign language requirement. This is a marketing issue not merely for higher education but for all of American industry, for how can we generate a favorable balance of trade if American salesmen do not speak the language of their foreign customers?

Specifically for higher education, it is hard to believe that anyone is truly educated who has not learned enough of a foreign language to comprehend in full the dependence of thought on language. This comprehension cannot be gained by a fleeting and confused "exposure" to a foreign language, and colleges and universities that are not prepared to provide a genuine encounter with foreign language are more honest to drop it altogether.

The practical deficiencies of uneducated students detract less from the idea of higher education than our proclamation that someone forever locked in the intellectual prison of his own language can be called "educated."

But we have escaped by and large and not a semester too soon—from the fraudulent position that higher education is not dependent on a curriculum. Unfortunately, we have not always chosen a curriculum that is consonant with the possibility of higher education for our students.

The recent attempt at reforming the undergraduate curriculum at Harvard College is an excellent example of how far we have drifted. The Report on the Core Curriculum, presented to Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences and approved by them, says the following:

> We do not think there is a single set of great books every educated person must master and we do not think an inevitably thin survey of the conventional areas—humanities, social sciences, natural sciences—is any longer useful.

That last part is harmless enough. The first part is a cultural statement of the greatest importance: "We do not think there is a single set of great books every educated person must master." This means that a person may receive the benefits of a Harvard education without having read the Bible or Homer or Aeschylus or any of Shakespeare or Plato or Aquinas.

The statement that there is no set of great books that an educated man must read may be satisfactory for the development of the undergraduate curriculum of Harvard, for Harvard has immense advantages in the recruitment of a student body who will continue to educate themselves despite the obstacles or deficiencies of any curriculum. But the statement, in my view, endorses a principle inconsistent with the survival of higher education at most colleges and universities.

In the development of undergraduate curricula, most colleges and universities must be animated at all points and at all times by the conviction that an educated person can read, with comprehension and without recourse to a reference library, the works of readily accessible poets such as Milton, or at least A. E. Housman.

Milton's sonnet "On His Blindness"—

> When I consider how my light is spent, Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
> And that one Talent which is death to hide
> Lodg'd with me useless, though my Soul more bent
> To serve therewith my Maker, and present
> My true account, lest he returning chide;

makes perfectly good sense to one who has read the parable of the talents, and no sense at all to one who has not. A student who has not read the Gospels, in trying to understand this sonnet, may require access to a research library. Or this:

> Methought I saw my late espoused saint
> Brought to me like Alcestis from the grave
> Whom Jove's great son to her glad husband gave
> Rescued from death by force though pale and faint.

Who's Alcestis? He must return to the research library to find out. These well known poems, high-school requirements in the 19th century all over the Midwest and in other benighted areas of the nation, may now be beyond the educational expectations of the graduates of our foremost university.

Consider the confusion of the student assigned the following lines:

> Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
> Is hung with bloom along the bough
> And stands about the woodland ride Wearing white for Eastertide.

The puzzled student will have to repair again to the library where he will find: Easter—a festival sacred to Christians, symbolized by the Easter lily (*Lilium harrisii*), white of color.

Higher education is infinitely complex and elusive…

In such a sterile educational tradition, we will be in the educational equivalent of the position described by Saint Exupery in his *flight to Arras*. Anticipating a mission from which he was unlikely to return, he wrote:

> And as I sat there longing for night, I was for a moment like a Christian abandoned by grace. I was about to do my job honorably, that was certain. But to do it as one honors ancient rites when they have no longer any significance, when the god that lived in them has withdrawn from them.

Or like Evelyn Waugh in his final despairing days recording in his diary:

> I am like the sentries at Buck House, on parade every day without any expectation whatever that they will be called upon to defend the life of the Sovereign.

The new Harvard curriculum does not so much seek to teach students a subject as to teach students about a subject:

> Our goal [the Committee reports] is to encourage a critical appreciation of an informed acquaintance with the major approaches to knowledge, not in abstract but in substantive terms, so that students have an understanding of what kinds of knowledge exist in certain important areas, how such knowledge is acquired, how it is deployed, and what it might mean to them personally.

It goes on to describe what this means in practice:

> A Literature and Arts requirement will acquaint students with important literary and artistic achievements and will aim to develop a critical understanding of the world... A requirement in Social and Philosophical Analysis will introduce the central concepts and ideas of social science and moral and political philosophy and will develop students' analytic skills in addressing fundamental aspects of individual and social life in contemporary society. Finally, a Science and Mathematics requirement will acquaint students with basic principles of the physical, biological, and behavioral sciences and with science as a way of looking at man and the world.

Thus, one does not necessarily learn a science; one learns something about a science and "how it is deployed." The presence of the buzzword, "deployed," indicates the committee's indecision and lack of conviction. In my opinion, such a program is not education. It is rather the contemporary equivalent of the grand tour obligatory for all well-finished young gentlemen 200 years ago—a month in France, two months in Italy, perhaps a week in Constantinople. The tour of cities and continents is replaced by a tour of the intellectual meta-horizon: an acquaintance not with the subject but with its principles and methodology.

Danger of Displacing Values of Higher Education

This is a very unfortunate example of the solipsism that was once thought to disfigure only the schools of education, wherein content was put on the back shelf to be covered up with studies of methodology, technique and process.

It is a bizarre notion that students can understand the structures and behavior of elephants and what elephants "might mean to them personally" when they have no idea what the elephant looks like.

The time was when we understood that the methodology of science was something to be studied and understood once one was competent in one or more sciences, and the methodology of literature was something to be studied after one had read extensively in one or more literatures.

To criticize such a program is not to engage in the sort of Harvard-bashing that is always tempting for the less fortunate and perhaps therefore envious. It is rather to suggest that we have so lost our way that what is arguably the greatest university in the world has lost part of its belief in higher education.

If American higher education continues along such a track—and where our greatest university leads many will inevitably follow—our colleges will eventually become as depleted as the schools of Athens when the Emperor Justinian finally closed them.

The Survival Value of Integrity

I believe that many of us, if not put to a public test before a board of trustees or before some foundation from which we wish to extract money, will admit that what Saint-Exupery said is true of our campuses. We find that the god has withdrawn from the ceremonies that we celebrate and from the principles for which we allegedly stand. This withdrawal is no fault of ours, or our fathers or our predecessors, nor the previous president of our institution, nor some vile board of trustees. The fault lies neither in our stars nor in ourselves, but in the cultural decline that marks this age.

In such a state, we may well wonder whether we are capable of offering higher education even to those who genuinely wish it.

We, as representatives of institutions, as people who teach in and work in and administer those institutions, must decide whether we will go with the cultural drift of our age, measuring the decline in our civilization by the decline in our expectations for our students and for ourselves. Or we must decide whether we will resist this current, and set much higher standards in curriculum and requirements that will identify us as the institutions in our society that stand for something.

We are doubtless obligated to do so as academics, on all the high and noble grounds that we are accustomed to invoke when we set ourselves apart from the vulgar and meaningless bustle of the great world.

But we are no less obligated to do so as a matter of simple marketing ethics. For that is what people expect of us.

The reputation of higher education, damaged as it is by the turmoil of the past decade, the erosion of standards, and the rise of a faculty unionism that places the teaching of classes about third—behind economic self-interest and personal self dramatization—is based precisely on the assumption that we maintain high standards and maintain principles even when it may be inconvenient to do so.

If we abandon the principles of academic integrity—without a public declaration announcing the fact—we shall be engaging in a very serious piece of marketing fraud. We shall certainly be found out at length, and we may expect that retribution will follow, partially in the form of boycott and partially in the form of control. Both are in the air even now: we have had our warning.

If we foolishly insist that the quality of our product is whatever we say it is (and if we cannot state it short of a thirty-page committee report) the consumers—our students and parents who demand truth in selling from others—will at length turn their full attention to us.

It is not clear that even businesses that serve the public well at declining costs can withstand such an examination, but let us at least hope that we shall deserve to pass the scrutiny more or less intact. If we maintain our integrity, we shall have grounds for optimism.

Throwback: 1980

36th NACAC National Conference is held in Detroit, MI. Delwin K. Gustafson (Gettysburg College, PA) is NACAC president.

Congress establishes the Department of Education as a cabinet-level agency.

Mount St. Helens erupts.

Photomontage from the cover of the *The National ACAC Journal*, Volume 25, Number 1, July 1980.