

Higher costs, cuts are redefining higher education

HIGHER FEES. INCREASING consumerism. Greater influence by government and big business. The necessity of cutting costs by compromising quality.

Sound familiar? These trends resulted in the privatization of health care in the 1990s. The new frontier is higher education.

In "Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America," historian Page Smith argues that the decline of America's colleges and universities is "directly related to the trend toward research and away from teaching." Often, the "publish or perish" mentality, which fuels the pursuit of tenure, results in useless research and publications. But universities and even many small colleges have adopted the trend because of their growing financial dependency on government and big business, which award research grants.

The real victims are the students and the diminished quality of teaching they receive. This is only part of the problem, though.

Higher education is pricing itself beyond the means of the middle class. Penn State University, for example, instituted a 20 percent increase in tuition just this year. It is a hefty increase for an institution that once had the reputation of providing a high-quality education at an affordable cost.

Higher tuition rates, coupled with other cost-cutting measures, have resulted in changing profiles for both students and faculty.

No longer are the majority of students 18 to 22, full-time, and residing on campus. They are older, part-timers who

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WILLIAM KASHATUS

have full-time jobs and are not necessarily planning to earn a degree, but simply improve their marketability in the work force. Since these students do not require extra-curricular support, the quality of life on campus is no longer as great a priority as it once was. Nor is the need to retain full-time faculty to become involved in the extracurricular life of the school.

Not surprisingly, universities and colleges are increasingly turning to adjunct faculty to carry out the fundamental mission of providing quality teaching to students: Once used exclusively by community colleges to reduce faculty salaries and benefits, the perma-temp system is becoming a model for the rest of higher education.

To be sure, tenured faculty will never be eliminated at the most prestigious institutions. But tenure is becoming a luxury that will soon be awarded to only the top names in any given field. National trends show that 64 percent of the faculty members who retired between fall 1997 and fall 1998 left tenured positions, just 45 percent of those who were hired were awarded tenure are tenure-track jobs.

Under these circumstances, highly qualified educators, many of whom are more dedicated to teaching than research, are forced to cobble together a

career as adjuncts at several institutions. These independent contractors sometimes teach as many as five courses a semester at different institutions, for as little as 25 percent of the cost of a full-time professor.

While the rise of the "perma-temp" and the part-time student signals the economic realities of our society, they are not necessarily bad developments. Adjunct professors are often working in the fields they teach and are also free from the political bureaucracy that has created grade inflation.

Their presence offers an extraordinarily rich source of expertise, and their lack of dependence on the institution the potential to restore academic standards by holding students more accountable for their work.

Similarly, part-time students with full-time jobs are usually more highly motivated to learn than those who attend full-time. Their drive and curiosity can only add to the intellectual atmosphere of any university or college, and serve as a welcome relief from students who believe that they are entitled to a higher education.

Only time will tell if higher education will be stronger for these trends, or will compromise quality for economic expedience.

William C. Kashatus, a professional historian at Chester County Historical Society, is an adjunct professor of history at West Chester University. He holds a doctorate in history of education from the University of Pennsylvania.

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