

Higher education is being eroded by tuition hikes and a focus on research.

# Losing the college experience

By William C. Kashatus

**H**igher fees. Increasing consumerism. Greater influence of government and big business. The necessity to cut 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 dependence on government and big business, which award research grants. The real victims are the students for 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.

Pennsylvania State University, for example, instituted a 13.5 percent increase in tuition this school year. It is a hefty increase for an institution that has had a 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 students and faculty.

No longer are the majority of students 18 to 22, full time, and living on campus. They are older part-timers who have full-time jobs and who are not necessarily planning to earn a degree, but who are improving their marketability in the workforce. Because these students do not require extracurricular support, the quality of campus life and school spirit itself are no longer priorities as they once were.

That's a shame.

In my later years, one of the things I've come to appreciate about my own college experience is that what the institution taught me was not as important as how it taught me.

Though I certainly learned a lot in the classroom about the discipline of history, the lessons that al-



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lowed me to grow as a human being were learned outside it. Writing for the college newspaper taught me how to discern fact from conjecture on the issues that affected the school and the local community. Participation in intercollegiate and intramural sports taught me the intangible values of teamwork, fair play and perseverance. Tutoring disadvantaged schoolchildren for the college's community-service program taught me to avoid the stereotypes of society, instilled a sense of humility, and inspired me to become a teacher after my graduation. I am the person I am today because of those experiences and the commitment my college made in providing

them.

One of the main reasons I enjoyed such opportunities, though, was that involvement by faculty in the extracurricular life of the college was an inextricable part of the teaching commitment. Today, universities and colleges are increasingly turning to adjunct faculty to carry out the fundamental mission of teaching students. Once used exclusively by community colleges to reduce faculty salaries and benefits, this "perma-temp" system, as it is known, is becoming a model for the rest of higher education.

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 and that just 45 percent of those who were hired were awarded tenure-track jobs. Those who do enjoy tenure are often more committed to research and writing rather than teaching, let alone community involvement.

The rise of part-time students and part-time faculty in higher education has diluted the humanitarian qualities that are essential to active participation in a democratic society. If our colleges and universities truly care about preparing students to enter the larger society as informed, socially responsible citizens, they will pay more attention to the quality of the education they provide than to the bottom line.

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