

Saving Higher Education in the Age of Money

By James Engell and Anthony Dangerfield

University of Virginia Press 2005, 277 pages

Reviewed by

Darren Linvill (darrenl@clemson.edu), Lecturer in Communication Studies, *Clemson University*

The practice of corporate sponsorship in academia has become pervasive and can be seen on campuses across the country. The names of beverage makers and telecommunication giants are finding their way into our nation's student centers and classroom buildings. The motivation for conferring such names is, of course, monetary. In a recent issue of *Academe*, Altbach (2006) reflects:

Today, no limits seem to exist on what can be named. If something does not have a name, it is up for grabs—a staircase, a pond, or a parking garage. ...Development offices no doubt have long lists of campus assets that can be named for various sums. (p. 47)

Money is rarely, however, given without strings attached, and many in academia are increasingly concerned about the impact a growing culture of money is having. Some question whether higher education is beginning to take its responsibility to raise funding more seriously than its responsibility to both students and society. President Polisi of The Juilliard School shares this concern. Referring to his institution's organ department, which consists of only nine majors, he states that the institution has a "responsibility to educate individuals who can knowledgeably carry forward the traditions of this great instrument. If you develop everything based on the marketplace...you'll eventually have a school dedicated to *American Idol*" (Jepson, 2005, p. D7).

Engell and Dangerfield clearly share the concerns of Altbach, Polisi, and many other

scholars and professionals. In their book, *Saving Higher Education in the Age of Money* (2005), winner of the Association of American Colleges and Universities 2007 Frederic W. Ness Book Award, Engell and Dangerfield address the causes and effects of this culture of money which has invaded American higher education. Engell and Dangerfield's argument is that the pursuit of money as an ends rather than a means in higher education has fundamentally altered campus culture and the pursuit of knowledge within that culture. Their argument is that these changes have not been positive and that the situation is in need of mending, a task made more difficult by "the acquiescence of those who are unsettled in thought, but passive in action" (p. 11).

An important tenet to Engell and Dangerfield's argument is that fields that are growing in terms of faculty salaries and size, enrollment and graduation numbers, alumni donations, budgets, and even standardized test scores fit one of three standards:

1. the field promises more money in lifetime earnings to its graduates, though the promise may be illusory;
2. the field studies money; or
3. it receives significant money from federal grants or private funding. (p. 5)

Engell and Dangerfield assert that any field not meeting one of these three standards has slipped in perceived importance for decades, and that the rate of this slippage is growing at an increasing rate.

Engell and Dangerfield maintain that concentrating on economic gain in higher education is not only shortsighted, but counterproductive. The authors contend that the purpose of higher education is to serve three instrumental functions: economic, social, and civic. These three functions serve two final goals. The first of these regards the "ethical application of knowledge and its relationship to human conduct" (p. 24). The authors' second goal "is intellectual, the fundamental search to discover and to order knowledge and ideas" (p. 24). They believe this intellectual goal is the definitive goal of education which all other functions serve. When the economic function of higher education is emphasized to the exclusion of all else, it seriously harms the definitive goal of discovering and ordering knowledge. This, they believe, is where concentrating on the economic function becomes counterproductive, as it "reduces the huge potential of economic benefits derived from unforeseen, future applications of new knowledge" (p. 24). In short, aiming directly at a target is often not the ideal way to get a bull's-eye.

Engell and Dangerfield address two particular attitudes related to the culture of money in higher education which exacerbate the problems they see. First is the idea that institutions are in competition with one another, an idea we see perpetuated by rankings such as those published by *U.S. News and World Report*. The authors claim that measuring complex institutions and people is not the same as judging the winner of a swimming race. Money is a significant part of this ranking process and a basis of judgment in many rankings. The authors contend that this focus crowds out less tangible attributes.

A second, more important, attitude of the culture which Engell and Dangerfield describe is the view that money is all important. This creates an important problem:

when money becomes the chief or only goal, when other purposes and goods, such as

discussing values, promoting social justice, enhancing aesthetic appreciation, grasping historical causes, and simply learning more, or educating citizens to make intelligent choices in their self-government, forming personal judgment, and—most intangible, but still fundamental—becoming a better person, when these are squeezed or squeezed out because attention to them hampers the accumulation of money, then money has triumphed as the single end. (p. 11)

This tirade illustrates the point that many intangibles are lost when money becomes all important. By its nature, money is easy to quantify and an easy benchmark for success or failure, but to give it preeminence is dangerous not only to the culture of higher education, but ultimately to our way of life.

Engell and Dangerfield make two specific calls to action in an effort to battle the current trends. First, they believe universities should try to inspire among their members real loyalty to the institution and its mission. Universities must have a genuine, visible interest in scholarship and learning which is expressed to the students at every opportunity if they hope to reach them and make them believers in education beyond simply how much money their degree will make for them. These students will be loyal to the institution and its ideals in the future. It is also these students which will enjoy the less tangible benefits of higher education. It should be a goal of all academic professionals to work toward fostering this love of learning, as it is in the best interests of both the students and the institution.

Second, Engell and Dangerfield claim that students should be taught the history and background of American higher education. The authors state that students have the impression that anything that happens on a university campus that is not related to career advancement is pure ritual or ceremony. The activities and purposes behind a college or university's actions must be made relevant to students and their daily lives. Engell and Dangerfield make the point that "American universities are, indeed, among the best in the world. But not to know why—and the reasons are historical—endangers that superiority" (p. 225). They do admit that cultivating this awareness is made difficult by a popular culture which is thriving with anti-intellectual attitudes that hinder reflection and create a divide between students and their institution. It is our place, according to the authors, to bridge this divide.

Engell and Dangerfield discuss practical methods to bridge the gap between institutions and their students. Faculty should be rewarded for teaching in the same way that they are rewarded for research and publication. Students can be brought into the research process earlier and more directly, and faculty should be rewarded for encouraging them to do so. Finally, teaching and testing methods that best facilitate student learning should be utilized—methods beyond the 300-person lecture hall and cramming for multiple choice tests. Even these methods will take money, however, and the two admit that money is in many ways integral to academia and that there has never been an age when the two were independent of one another.

While education professionals at every level can advocate for the types of change suggested by Engell and Dangerfield, those working in first-year and transition programs are in a unique position to reach undergraduates. Students need to be made aware of the

concrete benefits of the liberal arts and sciences early in their college education and prior to choosing a field of study. The American workplace is evolving faster than ever. According to a recent report released by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, “careers themselves have become volatile...employers are calling with new urgency for graduates who are broadly prepared and who also possess the analytical and practical skills that are essential both for innovation and for organizational effectiveness” (College Learning for the New Global Century, 2007, p. 15-16). The liberal arts and sciences afford this broad preparation, teaching students to think and reason critically. Education professionals in first-year and transition programs can and should help students to understand the tangible benefits these skills can provide.

References

- Altbach, P. G. (2006). What's in a name? For a million bucks or so, you can name that school. *Academe*, 92(1), 46-47.
- National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise (2007). *College learning for the new global century*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities. Retrieved March 2, 2007, from http://www.aacu.org/advocacy/leap/documents/GlobalCentury_final.pdf
- Jepson, B. (2005, April 21). He's peddling the organ to a new generation. *The Wall Street Journal*, p. D7.