

### The Cry against Consumerism in Higher Education

For the last three years, international students from the Center for International Student Access enrolled in ENGH 121-122 here at Mason have had to read Michael Potts' ["The Consumerist Subversion of Education"](#) which argues that education is a practice, much like law and medicine, and that the current unbalanced focus on the "business side" of the practice of higher education is ruining it. Potts calls for a rebalancing of the scales and bringing back into equal footing the "purpose" side in the practice of higher education.

To explicate his stance, Potts uses Alasdair Macintyre's idea of a "practice" (*After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed.) in which a practitioner performs an activity with a goal directly related to that endeavor as its driving force. For example, a doctor's primary goal is to alleviate illness, or at least pain, in her/his patients. When she achieves this goal, we say she has succeeded as a doctor. In Macintyre's terminology, she has achieved the "goods internal" to the practice of medicine. If she is not able to consistently achieve these internal goods, we do not call her a doctor; we would not say that she is truly practicing medicine. However, in Macintyre's explanation, there is more to a practice than internal goods. There are also external goods:

A physician, for example, is paid for services rendered--that pay is an external good. The prestige a physician gains from his position is another example of an external good, as well as any public honors he may receive during his career. Thus, external goods are usually gained in the form of property of some kind; as a result, some individuals involved in a practice have more of them and others less (e.g., some physicians make more money than other physicians). Neither money nor prestige is a bad thing. But a physician who gets very little money and who does not gain prestige or honors can still be a good physician if he treats his patients effectively. Thus, if the external goods gained from practicing medicine are not present, a person can still practice medicine. But internal goods are necessary to a practice and stem from the nature of the practice itself (Potts, 56).

Nevertheless, in the end, a practice needs a balanced focus on both internal and external goods or it will cease to exist. If our doctor only focuses on the goods internal of healing patients and not on collecting fees for her services, in the long run she will not have the means to obtain basic necessities for herself or her patients such as food and housing for herself and medical equipment and medicine for her patients, and, good intentions aside, her medical practice will no longer exist.

Having used the example of a medical doctor to explain what a practice is, Potts moves on to present his view of higher education as a practice with both external and internal goods. What has happened in the current higher education paradigm, according to Potts, is that we have begun to focus almost exclusively the external goods side of our practice of education. Administrators, students, their families, the greater society, even faculty, have shifted their focus from the goods internal of education to the external goods and in this commodification of higher education have slowly but surely been killing it.



I bring up Potts' idea of higher education as a practice out of balance because I find it a useful companion to the ideas of excellence and globalization presented by Bill Readings in *The University in Ruins*.

Readings primary argument is that social shifts toward a global, capitalist world order have pulled the rug out from under the feet of the modern university, leaving us with the task of figuring out how to construct a post-modern university that has as at its center a new purpose that better "fits" our evolving social reality, one in which the past national, political, economic, religious and ethnic differences are dissolving into something new. Most of the dissolution of these past ideas (that coincidentally provided some sort of ideological grounding for education) is a result of the collapse of the modern nation state and the rise of world-wide transnational corporations, or TNCs (Readings, p. 44). These TNCs wield more economic power, and thus political power, than most countries. Think of Apple, Google, Sony and Samsung as examples of such TNCs. Decisions and actions made by these digital information companies have greater effect on individual lives across the world than do the governments of the countries in which these people live. With this shift in political and economic power must come a shift in institutions of higher education; changes in the larger social system in which education exists are eroding past purposes for education, leaving it without a center.

One possible "grounding" for education is Readings idea of "excellence" as outlined in chapter two of *The University in Ruins*. He sees it as an adoption of "total quality management" (TQM) principles from the globalizing corporate world in which efficiency and productivity are key goals. Excellence in the realm of higher education is measuring how well "things" happen. How many students are admitted each year? Where do they come from? What racial, ethnic, religious, national and gender groups are presented in our students and faculty? How many traditionally and non-traditionally aged students do we have? What is the graduation rate? How long does it take students to graduate? Do students use our library, Women's Center, Health Center, Recreation and Wellness Center? How many crimes are committed on campus each semester? What are we doing to address interpersonal conflicts in the dorms? How much are students learning in their classes? What are students learning in the classroom? What is the student-to-faculty ratio? What percentage of classes is taught by tenured faculty? What percentage is taught by adjunct faculty? How does our university compare to other universities? Collecting, analyzing and responding to information generated by such questions require a lot of administrative work. And that work follows a business model, a corporate TNC model that is not bound to any underlying ideal other than efficiency and productivity. It is not bound to the medieval University's unifying principle of theodicy, the early modern University's principle of rationalism or, later based on the theories of the German Idealists, the concept culture as the subject of study and inculcation (Readings, 56). The result is that higher education is turning into a business. Here is where Potts and Readings converge. They both see this corporatization of education as a systemic disease that will eventually kill the University.

In Potts' view

In a practice, even in difficult financial times, external goods should always be subsumed under the internal goods of the practice. In violating this fundamental good (imparting knowledge and intellectual virtue), college and university administrators who operate out of the consumer model are behaving unethically. ...the customer model corrupts higher education as a whole, to

the point that it is no longer higher education. Under such a system, colleges and universities come very close to being "degree mills," and administrators and faculty lose their moral authority. If quality is sacrificed to customer satisfaction, with the attendant lack of quality teaching, tough grading, and student discipline, the college or university becomes merely a purveyor of expensive pieces of paper. (63).

His answer is "to rethink the way much of higher education is envisioned, so that it can return to fulfilling its fundamental end of imparting knowledge and intellectual virtue, and truly become 'higher education' (63). In other words, Potts advocates a return to the German ideal of the University studying and imparting culture.

Before reading Readings, I found Potts' argument satisfying. It appeals to my distrust of corporations and the application of a business model to all aspects of life. It seemed enough to point out "what is wrong with higher education these days" using a well thought out argument about a practice in comparison to an enterprise. But reading *The University in Ruins* has pushed me beyond Potts conservative call, as logical as it is, to solve our current crisis in higher education simply by reining in the amount of authority we give to the business side of the University and keeping our intellectual minds focused on the grindstone of passing on "the knowledge of the ages" to our students. While I might not totally agree with Readings proposal that a better focus for the University is to ground itself in a center of "dissensus," making the University the place "where thought takes place beside thought, where thinking is a shared process without identity or unity" (Readings, 192), I do agree that we in higher education need to move beyond nostalgia for a centering anchor from the past to a new *raison d'etre* that is reflective of our new borderless social order.

