

Home Truths About the University

By T.E. Wilder

How Professors Play the Cat Guarding the Cream, by Richard M. Huber (Fairfax, VA: George Mason University Press, 1992) 200 pages, index.

Contra Mundum, No. 7, Spring 1993

Subtitled *Why We're Paying More And Getting Less in Higher Education*, the book is really a succinct handbook of how colleges, but especially universities function. Huber explains their differences from other organizations such as businesses and accounts for many of academia's seemingly bizarre policies and priorities.

How can a college get away with charging \$100,000 tuition for a four-year college degree? Can't it deliver better value than that? The answer is that this is very good value, once it is understood that the parents are buying their child a degree, not an education.

The lifetime yield of a baccalaureate from a selective university continues to represent a favorable return on investment *student/parent demand for prestigious degrees exceeds the collegiate supply. There are more aspiring elitists than there are spaces in elite colleges.* (p. 7)

The mere fact of paying a hundred grand insures that few other parents can match the expense, and one's offspring qualifies for upper class status.

Why do faculty at prestige schools do so little teaching? Their job is to bring recognition and high ranking to the school by research and publishing. This gives more prestige to the degrees the school grants, thus making them more valuable, and allowing higher tuition to be charged. A student at a prestige university may take many of his courses from an underprepared graduate student, who can't teach and may not even know much English. The degree the student receives, however, is worth much more than the education offered by a community college where all the courses are taught by experienced faculty with Ph.D. degrees.

Another reason faculty prestige counts for so much is that it brings in the research contracts, especially from the Federal government. This is where the big bucks are. Research grants not only pay the costs of laboratory equipment and supply the salaries of the assistants, but also much of the general operating costs for campus facilities. In

addition the research generated produces the prestige that keeps the students and the government money coming.

Huber also tries to explain the culture wars over multiculturalism and the curriculum, though this is not the center of his interest. Nevertheless, he provides a useful outline of issues and positions that would be much harder to glean from most books devoted to the cultural topic.

The latter part of the book includes proposals for reforms, and several pages of university classifications and rankings. These may be of use to prospective students who want to evaluate the difference in tuition among schools.

Huber has usefully focussed attention on the question: What is the relation between what we go to college for and what we pay for? Every parent and student needs to consider this most carefully. Does he want an education (in the traditional sense of humane letters)? Does he want entry into a prestigious professional school? Or an apprenticeship in the most up to date engineering techniques? What school delivers this at the best price?

The Christian educator needs to ponder the creation of effective alternatives to the overpriced university.