

January 2002

The Commodification of Higher Education: Tools of Management

Elisabeth Baker

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc>



Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Baker, Elisabeth (2002) "The Commodification of Higher Education: Tools of Management," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 23 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol23/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Education and Social Services at ScholarWorks @ UVM. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Vermont Connection by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks @ UVM. For more information, please contact donna.omalley@uvm.edu.

The Commodification of Higher Education: Tools of Management

Elisabeth Baker¹

The purpose of this article is to raise fundamental questions which describe how faculty perceive a rise in the use of rational management strategies on their campuses - strategies originally developed in the business sector - with the effect of putting pressure on more traditional academic values and ways of organizing.

Introduction

In the spring of 2000, I conducted a qualitative research study that was the basis of my dissertation, titled "The Commodification of Higher Education: An Analysis of Faculty Members' Experience in a Market Driven Age." The purpose of the study was to describe faculty members' perceptions of commodification in higher education and to understand the way it plays out in their lives. Commodification is the process by which "social domains and institutions, whose concern is not producing commodities in the narrower economic sense of goods for sale, come nevertheless to be organized and conceptualized in terms of commodity production, distribution and consumption" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 207). In higher education, institutions and their faculty members become defined in terms of their productive capacity.

This qualitative study used a case study approach, primarily relying on participant interviews, to gather the experiences of commodification from 16 long-time tenured faculty members from three different higher education institutions. The institutions from which participants were selected included Indiana University at Bloomington (IUB), Middlebury College, and The University of Vermont (UVM). As commodification is largely concerned with being competitive in the market, the financial picture of the organization was one concept that guided my site selection. Among the other salient characteristics of these organizations, Middlebury College, presented a resource-rich, private college with a strong liberal arts commitment. IUB employed the use of a specific budget model on campus, Resource Centered Management (RCM), which parallels the entrepreneurial among other characteristics of the market, and UVM, at the time of the data collection, had ended (or so it was hoped) a 10-year series of "interim" leaders, had implemented a series of budget reductions, and was in the process of redefining itself through a multifaceted strategic planning endeavor.

What follows is one part of this research largely derived from a dissertation chapter titled the "Tools of Management." It describes how faculty perceive a rise in the use of rational management strategies on their campuses --strategies originally developed in the business sector --with the effect of putting pressure on more traditional academic values and ways of organizing.

Tools of Management

I have a lot of doubts as to whether you can apply business principles of productivity or cost effectiveness models to the normal functioning of the college or university. We don't have a product, or not a product that you can measure in a concrete way. (Middlebury participant)

In "the 20 years between 1976 and 1996, the average tuition at public universities increased from \$642 to \$3,151, and the average tuition at private universities increased from \$2,881 to \$15,581" (Harvey, Williams, Kirshstein, O'Malley, & Wellman, 1998, p. 1). Shumar (1997) traces the rising costs of higher education to their structural roots, citing dramatic demographic, economic, and political shifts that resulted in economic highs in the 1960s followed by lows in the 1970s. These shifts created a crisis in higher education. He argues that, typical of capitalism, crisis opened the door for tighter control and manipulation "in the service of, and subject to market forces" (Shumar, 1991, p. 16).

Elisabeth Baker received her Bachelor, Masters, and Ed.D. degrees from The University of Vermont. Currently, she serves as the Assistant to the Dean for Administrative Services in the College of Education and Social Services at UVM.

In the wake of these cost increases, there has been a trend in the management of academic institutions “toward the adoption of the tools of management originally developed in the business sector” (Dill, 1982, p. 305). Organizational downsizing has become educational downsizing under pressure to cut costs, manifested in cutbacks, layoffs, and outsourcing of both service (e.g. janitorial, copying, maintenance) and academic (e.g. on-line courses) functions (Winner, 1997). Management strategies to respond to new challenges are drawn from business models, including the use of efficiency measures, mission statements, strategic planning (Shumar, 1997), management by objectives, and goal-based planning (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). This trend has been described as a rise of “instrumental rationality” on college campuses; a method for response to crises and a way to explain institution practices under these circumstances (Shumar, 1997).

This narrative describes participants' observations as the rise in the use of rational management strategies puts pressure on more traditional academic values and ways of organizing. It begins with a section entitled "Higher Education Run Like a Business," which illuminates some of the differences between higher education and business, such as the values of community and autonomy. The next section highlights what Stone (1997) identified as the conundrum of "Competing Efficiency Goals" by examining a common productivity measure in higher education, the student-to-faculty ratio.

The third section focuses on participant observations that cite, for the most part, an increasing use of "Numbers to Measure" aspects of the academy, most commonly faculty productivity, student outcomes, and university rank. Stone (1997) observed that because the grouping of actions involves inclusion and exclusion, likeness may be asserted where there are differences, or certain things may be counted excluded. This section next examines the ambiguity inherent in numbers, followed by UVM faculty's experience with a "culture of evidence" being introduced on campus. Next, a discussion of standardizing workload in the academy is illustrated by Middlebury participants, and last, attention is focused on the use of numbers to compare colleges with one another in the *U.S. News and World Reports'* college rankings. The discussion section raises fundamental questions, the answers to which would contribute to predicting what the future holds for campuses with intensified rational management techniques.

Higher Education Run Like a Business

Yes, we are in some ways behaving more like a big business, but if we can do that to the parts of our institutions that need to be cost-effective, [it] frees up our students and our faculty to think good thoughts, to learn effectively, to provide service [to the] public I think that's appropriate.
(Middlebury participant)

With the increasing use of business management tools as a commodifying trend, I asked participants what they thought of when they heard the phrase, "Higher education is/should be run like a business." Whenever the phrase was used, I would find myself thinking of the exception. "As a comprehensive university, we may have to offer some programs that do not pay for themselves!" The difference to me is inherent in the definition of commodification. Higher education is not about making widgets that are bought and sold at the cash register, or traded on Wall Street; it is about offering programs not solely dependent on the bottom line. Hence, when some principles from commodity production industries are applied to higher education, the fit is just not right. This section begins to illuminate the ways that, in faculty members' opinions, business tools, and styles do and do not suit the academy.

Alternative Organizational Models

Blustain (2000) pointed to alternative ways of organizing as a way to frame how higher education differs from business. For example, imagine "universities as preindustrial societies. . . [where] . . . the maximization of profit is not what life's about. Instead, they are built around a shared moral order based on kinship and community" (p. 32).

Money enables universities to function, but the values are community, collegiality, inquiry, and truth. Outsourcing, even if it means cleaner bathrooms, tears the fabric of the campus community. Layoffs, even if they save money, fracture the moral bonds of paternalism. The granting of exclusive pouring rights to Coca-Cola, even if it brings in needed revenue, violates cherished notions of choice and freedom. (p. 32)

This and other models share the idea that higher education differs from business in its underlying values of community and autonomy. Its processes for accommodating a variety of constituencies that each have different ideas of efficiency, quality, and productivity.

Likewise, some participants suggested alternative ways of running the institution that are less hierarchical than traditional business models.

..."management strategies," [this] language . . . is sort of vaguely thought or abstractly thought to increase the efficiency of any institution. But there doesn't seem to have been any thought about actually trying to look at how this institution runs and how it could be made more efficient in a problem-oriented way. (Middlebury participant)

I do believe that we, as an institution of higher education, have a responsibility to be cost-effective. The ways we go about doing that, I think, are really important and that we don't have to do it one way, or a traditional way (meaning hierarchical, top-down management). I think that it could be a great opportunity to model mutual respect for everyone, in a way that we identify the problems associated with being cost-effective and providing quality education. (UVM participant)

The first quote suggests looking at the problems within the specific organization and involving whoever wishes to do something about the situation in question. The second quote similarly suggests broadening the problem-solver group to include those who have a stake in costs and quality. Together, they align with the value of community in higher education and the tradition of self-governance among the faculty.

Against the Academic Grain

I was cautioned early on in my formulation of research questions to be prepared for someone to say "But, I don't think it is run like a business," quickly making my sequence of questions irrelevant. But that didn't happen. Many faculty members felt strongly about financial solvency. One participant remarked, "You can't run this place without money!...If you are in charge of budgets . . .you need to be responsible. I don't see anything wrong with that; that seems to me to be rational and necessary."

Like this participant, most would agree that there needs to be financial integrity within the organization. Objections begin when the purpose of education is stripped of its less tangible features by business strategies. The features at risk that are suggested below are all related to notions of self-fulfillment and of intellectual and moral growth.

You can't view a college simply as a business. It's not simply a business. If it doesn't have any higher purpose of educating people so they will have useful careers and so they will be fulfilled in their careers, so they will be happy in their careers, so that they will do good for other people, I don't think there is any point in education. (Middlebury participant)

At the same time, this person remarks, "It [is] necessary to have . . .at least some people who are going to go out there . . .to Wall Street . . . and make money and give it back" to the institution.

Some felt a business model did not fit with their image of an educational institution. One faculty member argued that higher education should be viewed as a professional service organization; a "public utility" as opposed to a "capitalist enterprise" in which the logic of the market prevails. In this respect:

....it has professional knowledge and expertise that it can provide a service to the state, and to the nation, and to larger international communities. . . Within [it], professionals have autonomy. They set the conditions under which they serve, but they have a service ethic. The notion is not of marketing, but of public relations, of community outreach. Then, the student is seen as someone in the trust or care of the university, and that if you want to look at it differently you look at it as a nurturing kind of environment maybe. But not as one that is meeting necessarily a client-determined demand. (IUB participant)

The traditional values of autonomy in the faculty profession and self-motivated service to society in the form of transmitting knowledge are felt to be lacking-or even under attack-in business models.

Accepting the Bottom Line and Cost Efficiency

Beyond accepting the fact that there needs to be financial integrity in a higher education organization, participants noted more businesslike practices as the norm .A participant at IUB acknowledged that "there is only so much money" and

attributed that condition to the type of university. "When you teach at a state school, . . . there are constraints." For others, the notion of being "bottom line conscious," or cost conscious, was quite natural. A participant from the business discipline described how the logic of efficiency is engrained.

Interacting with people who are "bottom line conscious," everything you do in our profession you think about the allocation of resources to projects and activities that bring some kind of a measurable return. . . .For someone maybe in sociology or philosophy or political science, that's not part of their radar screen. (IUB participant)

Some faculty members with experience in managing research dollars also found being efficient with resources a routine part of their activity—they sought to get the most out of a given input. One participant remarked on the pressure and necessity of gaining grant dollars as a fact of research life.

Clearly, the aspect of having your entire career progression be based on your ability to raise funds . . . is antithetical to an academic mission. But it is also a statement of facts of life, that if you are going to do scientific research, it costs money to do that.

Participants spoke to the various components of their budgets and "constantly tried to sort out where we can spend money most effectively and how." Another paralleled grant work with business: "[In business] if you don't produce, your stock goes down, and if we don't produce, our quality goes down."

Competing Efficiency Goals

Music is in a real fragile position because all of its performance faculty teach one student at a time. You can't teach mass cello! (IUB participant)

A student-to-faculty ratio is a common measure of productivity in higher education. In this measure, the implied objective is to teach the most students for the input, namely, the faculty resource. Consequently, the more students in a class taught by one instructor, the more efficient that unit is with that resource. Stone's (1997) analysis of efficiency goals challenges us to uncover other objectives, which, if used, may lead to a different interpretation of efficiency. For example, some faculty in this study felt that there are strong pedagogical reasons for smaller class sizes; the impact of their teaching is greater with fewer students. One remarked, "I could get to know those students a lot better and give them and their work a lot more attention if I didn't have so many." If teaching rests in smaller size classes results in a greater impact, then resources might be better spent in mentoring relationships, were we to define efficiency in this way. It would mean getting fewer students taught for the same resource. The tension between these competing definitions of efficiency—teach the most students for the input versus a greater impact of teaching with fewer students—was most evident at IUB.

IUB was the most fertile ground for understanding the competing efficiency goals underlying student-to-faculty ratios. This makes sense given the RCM environment, in which credit-hour enrollments drive income to the unit that teaches the student. With a budget environment that has teaching the most students as a criterion or measure at its core, the faculty, although attentive to this goal, must balance it with their goals for student learning. The following quotes illustrate trade-offs of traditional academic values when pressure for large class sizes is the goal.

Music is in a real fragile position because all of its performance faculty teach one student at a time. You can't teach mass cello! If they have 18 students, which is the normal load, it means they are teaching 18 lessons a week, plus a master class so you could hardly expect them to do more than that. (IUB participant)

You can do a good job with a large lecture class. I have no problem with that. But when you want students to experience something like doing research and writing it up and having somebody grade it with more than a cursory look at it, then the resources are few. (IUB participant)

When larger classes are a motivation, faculty members made note of certain ancillary events. Two participants said they were told they could not offer smaller classes—one by a college dictum and one by the president of the university. These experiences begin to encroach on the traditional notion that curriculum is the purview of the faculty. Another mentioned the lure of providing popular programs to the exclusion of more traditional course offerings, like Latin, "which is important if we're going to say we are a major university." This participant continues, "I would hate to see them eliminated because they're not tremendously popular."

A UVM participant described that sometimes the input side of the equation, the faculty resource, can influence the output side of the equation, the number of students taught.

UVM is a little different in that . . . an awful lot of the undergraduate courses are taught by full-fledged tenured faculty. That is very costly, very expensive, so how are you going to fund it? You can't fund it solely on tuition so, how are you going to do it? Well, you are going to increase the class size, demand higher productivity. So, instead of teaching classes of 14 or 15, you are going to teach classes of 80. (UVM participant)

The student-to-faculty ratio in this case would be higher with the effect of lowering the input costs (faculty resource) per student if the same tenured faculty took on more students. Yet, this example also implies that costs per student would be lower if undergraduate teaching were contracted to lower-paid non-tenured faculty, or to graduate students, as has been the case in many institutions for years.

Numbers to Measure

The way that the money is now appropriated to the departments ...is all based on numbers that you generate-not based on what you do, or how well you do it. (UVM participant)

Numbers in a university setting are used, among other things, to count or measure faculty productivity and student outcomes, to provide a basis for resource allocation, and to compare universities with one another. Stone (1997) observed that:

It is impossible to describe counting without talking about inclusion and exclusion (terms that in themselves suggest community, boundaries, allies and enemies); selection (a term that implies privilege and discrimination); and important characteristics (a term that suggests value judgments and hierarchy). (p. 164)

The tensions faculty members relayed with respect to numbers and counting fell within these descriptions and were typically in conflict with what were perceived as traditional academic pursuits.

Measures That Exclude

Stone (1997) asserts that because counting involves inclusion and exclusion, real likenesses may be emphasized over differences. The notion that standard measures could be applied across the academy was challenged by participants. Faculty members from IUB offered several examples in which the apparent uniformity that numbers emphasized simply was not the case. One participant described a multidiscipline, group-generated set of counting criteria that was to be applied to all disciplines within a college. With its focus on research, published articles were counted in the measure, but published books were not. With its application to a discipline that was considered both a humanity and a science, not recognizing published books meant that "half of [one's] productivity simply doesn't count." Similarly, some disciplines provide service courses primarily and have no student majors. With student majors as a predominant group measured in assessing student outcomes, those disciplines without majors can be at a disadvantage. A third example was cited when undergraduate teaching is the standard by which effort on graduate education is compared. Here one participant remarked:

There [is an] expectation [of] graduate teaching-but that is done [on our] own. It is factored into the teaching load, but in terms of numbers of students that faculty ought to be teaching, it really isn't. I mean, I am on 19 dissertation committees and that doesn't count anywhere. (IUB participant)

However, this participant had learned how to work the system to his/her advantage. Effort that used to be offered to students on an individual basis in individual reading seminars, and consequently not "counted," has now been "turned into a course that will at least have a number so that students can register." Up until then, "those had been sort of free."

In her article "Nurturing an Engaged University," then UVM President Judith Ramaley described a need to incorporate broader definitions of scholarly work into what is now accepted as "scholarly legitimacy" (2000, p. 13). She stated, "Broadening the concepts of scholarly work will be extremely difficult unless a campus devises credible and effective ways to document and evaluate all forms of scholarship and a broad range of pedagogies" (p. 13). Although this is the past president of UVM writing, this values barrier was also illustrated by an IUB participant.

When people talk about research productivity, it means the number of dollars you bring in. Well, how do you measure research productivity in an area like philosophy or history [or] . . . education? Well, people don't generally go out and get large grants in this area. . . I am one of the leading scholars in [my] field. . . But I don't bring any money into the university with me! . . . My colleagues are some of the most distinguished scholars in their fields, and they are not bringing in money. So, this whole notion of the bottom line as even a measure of scholarly productivity, this starts the whole notion of how you define creativity and productivity, and it's not tied to dollars. (IUB participant)

It is worth noting that almost all of the participants who pointed out these difficulties with using numbers to measure were from the "softer sciences." One remarked, "The measures, for the most part, were quantitative, could be added up so that you got a score." Stone (1997) lent some perspective to this frustration: "Although numbers have a preeminent status in our scientific culture, measuring is only one way to describe. Literature describes with words, painting with pigments and brush strokes, and measurement with numbers" (p. 163). For those who are excluded or counted out, there is a need to redefine the measures, or get around traditional barriers by recognizing other descriptive and evaluative modes.

Standards of Measure

The teaching load at Middlebury College was well known by each participant and quick to be recited: a standard load is three courses in one semester, two courses in the other, and every other year, a winter-term course is included. Departments with comparatively few majors have, over time, been allocated greater proportions of service courses in the first-year seminar program. However, a department was not being allocated more service courses because they were less valued. Rather, this strategy for evening out workload was commonly presented in terms of equity across campus: "What was the fairest distribution?" (Middlebury participant)

Although the workload formula seemed to be applied uniformly across campus, it was not without some difficulty, particularly for the languages and sciences. One problem was that course preparations and labs differed in the effort they required of faculty members, and they were generally difficult to standardize. For courses with growing enrollments, another concern was that "once you reach a certain threshold, a course can't count for any more and all our courses are going from beyond that threshold to way, way, way beyond that threshold!" (Middlebury participant) It was also stated that some courses should not be large lectures, and trying to do so may "interfere with pedagogy." For example, teaching Contemporary Moral Issues with a lot of students "just does not work." (Middlebury participant)

Stone (1997) asserted, "Counting of any sort is a complex mental process, but measurement . . . is a complex social process as well, nothing like counting up piles of peas and beans" (p. 177). The experience of one Middlebury participant on how numbers were used in decision making exemplifies the contemplation necessary in social and political settings for applying such criteria.

The numbers guy had full accounts of how far short we'd fallen. . . but he was pretty scrupulously fair on all the numbers, I think. If there was something like this 50 enrollment criterion but we were only getting 43, he wasn't actually going to start striking things off. (Middlebury participant)

Stone (1997) continued, in political environments numbers are "subject to conscious and unconscious manipulation by the people being measured, the people taking the measurements, and the people who interpret and use measures made by others" (p. 177). Although the word "manipulation" is extreme, the point is that the measurer added his discretion when identified thresholds were involved.

Counting instructional workload is just one component of a broader issue of gauging faculty productivity. In a political environment, the question of "whether a phenomenon is measurable at all" is often raised (Stone, 1997, p. 173). This challenge was illustrated by a participant from Middlebury. Although the "productivity issue . . . has come up once or twice in discussions between faculty members and trustees, discussions among trustees, discussions among administrators," the dimensions have yet to be defined. "Whenever it has come up, it has led to some discussion, and then finally to people shrugging their shoulders in despair at ever finding any kind of measurement of productivity for college professors."

Ambiguity in Numbers

Another theme that emerged was the ambiguity of numbers. The same number can mean different things to different people, depending on one's perspective or in what forum they are used. A familiar illustration of this concept in higher education organizations is in the year-end balancing of budgets. To a unit, a large balance could mean prudent use of funds, whereas to central administrators, that balance could mean a unit had too much money to begin with. Similar conundrums were illustrated by Middlebury participants on the subject of student success and student outcomes with implications for the quality of the education.

A common measure for assessing the education provided to students is looking at where they go after they complete their undergraduate education. For many schools, numbers that demonstrate a high percentage of graduates going on to get Ph.D.'s would be a positive indicator of success. At Middlebury, such indicators can have a "double edge" depending on the meaning behind the measure. If the measure means that students are furthering their education and will produce more scholarship, that is good. If the measure means those students will gain job security or economic success, it gets a chillier reception. As a faculty member describes in this next quote, "When measures have a double meaning, the people being measured are put in a double bind."

Some of our less than understanding colleagues across campus have this vision that we are some kind of technical training center, as opposed to a . . . department in a liberal arts institution, which is how we pattern our courses. . . If we say, "Well, we need this so we can get more students into good . . . grad schools," that actually is negative, and if our graduates weren't going to grad school, some would see it as a positive on this campus! . . . It reaches a point where, in certain places, we don't brag about what our students are going to. (Middlebury participant)

Thus, depending on how the numbers are perceived, "it is good to be high on the measure but also good to be low" (Stone, 1997, p. 169). This participant's double bind was that students' success in attaining advanced degrees meant they would have a leg up on the job market, but the high percentage of students prepared for a job had a poor reception in a liberal arts tradition that did not see a utilitarian mission as the primary goal of education.

Another measure for assessing the education provided to students is documenting their careers once they have left departments. One faculty member objected primarily on the grounds that the commonly sought indicator-salary level-should not be a student outcome measure. Moreover, this would be a poor measure for making resource decisions in the Middlebury environment.

It seems patently obvious to me that the economics department is likely to be producing [graduates] who are going to have the highest incomes, or the political science department. But that . . . would seem to me a very bad reason for the college to say, "Well, we should put more money into those departments" . . . develop those departments as opposed to others that may be producing school teachers or social workers. (Middlebury participant)

This example, too, has a "double edge," but more at the institutional level than the individual level. Seeking information of this kind may go against established educational values, but it also has the practical purpose of keeping the institution afloat. It is also an example of a contradiction facing higher education brought on by commodification. What could have been a measure of personal fulfillment-the foundation for participation in a democratic society-is also being valued for its "ability to be translated into cash" (Shumar, 1997, p. 5)-both for the individual in terms of salary, and the institution in terms of bolstering its endowment.

A Culture of Evidence

Signs of being engaged in a competitive market driven academic environment are: competing for quality students and faculty, declining financial support, and competing for social prestige (Dill, 1982, p. 305). In a market model, resources

go to the "people who can use them to the greatest productive advantage or who will derive the greatest amount of welfare from them" (Stone, 1997, p. 69). Stone states, that allocations "signal the direction of resources to their best use" (p. 69).

Consistent with market models as a means for determining "best use," the "culture of evidence" introduced, at the time, at UVM was one that participants cited would drive an increase in the use of numbers on campus. One participant felt that using numbers to measure was already too prevalent in decision making and, in some cases, detrimental to creative academic pursuits.

Since I came to UVM, there has been a much closer look at productivity in terms of its faculty than it used to be back in the 1970s. . . As a faculty member, the whole thing here is just how much can you turn out. What is our productivity level? How many publications? How many grants did you write? How many advisees? How many undergraduates have been working with you this semester? How many graduates? How many Ph.D.'s have you turned out? Everything is numbers [and] I think what it has usurped over the years is creative thinking, time to think. (UVM participant)

There is irony in this participant's objection to increased rational management tools in academia because they inhibit creativity, since these were the same concerns some corporations had in the earlier 20th century. Shumar (1997) cited Noble's (1998) observation of the time: many corporations discovered that "the rationality of the business environment had a stifling effect on creativity" (p. 98) and, consequently, many businesses moved their research endeavors away from corporate headquarters to protect them from growing commodification in their environments.

Some participants, however, perceive that numbers were not being used to inform decision making, and felt their absence as available information was reflective of fundamentally irresponsible management.

If we start to measure, and we tighten things up and try to run it like a business, either as cost centers or profit centers, we start to turn the sunshine on and start to say, "Where is this money going? And, are we getting value for the money that is being spent?" Everything is going down through this black hole. . . . Let's live and behave the way that we teach and that is the scientific method! We collect data, we collect evidence, and we make decisions.

This participant continued, that where data were or could be available, it had been ignored or obfuscated in the struggle for resources. Now, when data are expected as a component to decision making, faculty members are less than receptive.

We get very sanctimonious, and we say, "We are jeopardizing the quality and the reputation of this fine school!" And we would like the central administration to take that on face value and say, "Oh my! How could we possibly have overlooked this! Here, please! Take these bags of money and go forth!" Well, where is the evidence that this is the case?

College Rankings

U.S. News and World Report is one well-known publication that uses numbers to rank colleges for academic excellence. Its rankings are derived from indexes organized under the broad categories of academic reputation, student retention, faculty resources, student selectivity, financial resources, graduation rate performance, and alumni giving rates. The factors are weighted by *U.S. News and World Reports'* assessment of the relative importance of each measure and a total weighted score is calculated for college rank (Morse & Flanigan, 2000).

During Middlebury College's 200-year celebration, a panel discussion planned around the theme "Selling the Ivory Tower," provided an opportunity for the community to engage in dialogue on the increasingly commoditized environment in which liberal arts colleges operate. College rankings were recognized for the influence they have on the education market and student choice. In that discussion, a brief anecdote was conveyed about college rankings. An unnamed college recently dropped the SATs as a criterion for admission. Consequently, the college received more applicants, denied a greater percentage of them, and looked more "selective" in the process. Thus, it was argued that the integrity of such measures were questionable when the numbers could be manipulated without real changes in the education offered (Quinn, Durden, and Marcus, et al, 2000).

In the same way, some participants from Middlebury and IUB questioned the integrity of the *U.S. News and World Reports'* rankings and conveyed the meaning that such measures held for them. At Middlebury, one participant was

disturbed by a variety of issues invoked with rankings. First, this participant was disturbed by the stock parents, students, and guidance counselors placed in an institution's position in *U.S. News and World Reports'* rankings. It "is really a piss poor way of judging colleges [laughter]." Second, the measure itself is troubling because it is not sensitive enough to reflect recent academic improvements.

Academically, this is a much better college than it was 15 years ago. But if you were to look at U.S. News and World rankings, we are stuck in a rut as far as academic ranking is concerned. In every other respect, this college has skyrocketed! But . . . to change academic reputation to some extent is to change a culture, and that is very difficult. And then to convince people outside of here that you have changed the culture is even harder. (Middlebury participant)

This participant's impression is consistent with how the ratings work and makes a statement about where the measure places value. *U.S. News and World Reports'* "ranking formula gives greatest weight (25%) to reputation because a degree from a distinguished college so clearly helps graduates get good jobs" (Morse & Flanigan, 2000, par. 12).

As earlier stated, at IUB where resources are closely tied to enrollments, the departments being measured are in a "double bind." This time the double bind emerges between the budget model and the ranking system. "Everyone is sort of trying to survive on how many students you are getting . . . [while] you get hurt because your ratio of rejections is not high enough." It was felt that the RCM budget model, which heightens pressure to bring in more students and produce a lot of student credit hours, is in conflict with college rankings that value a high rejection ratio as an indicator of excellence.

When a participant earlier charged that changing the ranking is as hard as changing the culture, it may have opened the door to seeing rankings on a different dimension. Stone (1997) urged, rankings are numbers. They are "no more real," or "as real" as poems and paintings that are collected, recited, and displayed (p. 186). As a painting is an artifact of culture, so too are numbers. "But the dominance of numbers as a mode of describing society . . . is only a recent, and perhaps temporary, phenomenon in cultural history-not the result of some underlying reality of numbers" (Stone, 1997, p. 186).

Discussion

Running the academy like a business may intensify application of the notion of efficiency and use of numbers to measure faculty work, and further erode traditional values and ways of organizing. Of the questions this trend raises for the academy and its faculty, I find two trends particularly fundamental to knowing what the future may hold for higher education with intensified businesslike practices. The first centers on the notion that higher education differs from business in its underlying values of community and autonomy, but it is the value of community I focus on here. One participant suggested that in certain aspects of the academy, particularly what is nonacademic in nature, it is appropriate to behave like a business, because it "frees up" resources for faculty and students to do their work. This struck me in a way as further tearing the fabric of higher education, where the community is somewhat less because a function of the broader organization is outsourced. The idea raises the question: Who is the community? Is it only tenured faculty, or full-time faculty, or faculty with part-time status of any rank? Does the community exclude administrators (who often straddle administrative and faculty camps), or professional staff, or support staff? How much can you lop off before you no longer have a community? And conversely, if narrowing the community is behaving like a business, then we must recognize we are embracing business practices in doing so. It seems to me a slippery slope, but what is meant by community will continue to be challenged by intensified rational management.

A second question comes out of the efficiency discussion and the trade-off of class size with the impact of teaching. Although I support proper pedagogy for learning, I feel that frequent retorts suggesting quality will be eroded or pedagogy sacrificed by larger class sizes are becoming hollow by lack of demonstration or casual use of this claim. I agree with those, for example, Levine(2000) and Harvey et al. (1998), who articulate the irony that in an industry based on critical reflection and knowledge creation, people too often make assertions without the evidence to back their claims. Quality is, like creativity, a difficult concept to demonstrate, particularly to a public that is increasingly tuned into numbers. However, many of higher education's stakeholders have accepted business principles as the norm. Consequently, we must own the dilemma of how to present qualitative, less tangible concepts to the rational majority. The question is: How are we going to do it?

References

- Blustain, H. (2000, August). Not a business, but like a business. Trusteeship, 8(4), 29-33.
- Dill, D. D. (1982). The management of academic culture: Notes on the management of meaning and social integration. Higher Education, 11, 303-320.
- Fairclough, N. (1992). Discourse and social change. Cambridge, UK: Billings & Sons.
- Harvey, J., Williams, R. M., Kirshstein, R. J., O'Malley, A., & Wellman, J. V. (1998). Straight talk about college costs and prices: Report of the National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 416 762).
- Kuh, G. D., & Whitt, E. J. (1988). The invisible tapestry: Culture in American colleges and universities (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No.1). Washington, D.C.: Association for the Study of Higher Education.
- Levine, A. (2000, October 27). The future of colleges: 9 inevitable changes. The Chronicle of Higher Education [On-line]. Available: <http://www.chronicle.com/weekly/sitesearch.htm> [Enter article title]
- Morse, R. J., & Flanigan, S. (2000). How we rank colleges. U.S. News and World Report [On-line]. Available: <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/rankings/collmeth.htm>
- Noble, D. F. (1998). Digital diploma mills: The automation of higher education. Monthly Review, 49(9), 38-52.
- Quinn, J. B., Durden, W. G., Marcus, D. L., O'Brien, D., & Scully, M. (2000, November). Selling the ivory tower. Panel discussion at Middlebury College's Bicentennial Celebration proceedings, Middlebury, VT.
- Ramaley, J. (2000). Nurturing an "engaged university." AAHE Bulletin, 52(7), 9-13.
- Shumar, W. R. (1991). College for sale: An ethnography of the commoditization of higher education (Doctoral dissertation, Temple University, 1991). Dissertation Abstracts International, 52-07A, 2610.
- Shumar, W. R. (1997). College for sale: A critique of the commodification of higher education. Washington, DC: Falmer Press.
- Winner, L. (1997). The handwriting on the wall: Resisting technoglobalism's assault on education [On-line]. Available: <http://www.rpi.edu/~winner/queens2.html> [Work cited as draft of chapter published in M. Moll (Ed.), High tech: Globalization and the future of Canadian education. Ottawa, Ontario: Fernwood Publishing]