

Universities in the Marketplace
The Commercialization of Higher Education
Derek Bok, Harvard University Press, 2003

This short book cautions against the temptations that universities face to commercialize their operations. In all spheres – research, teaching, and extra-curricular activities – universities and colleges are tempted, and in many ways. But, warns Bok, as tempting as these offers look, they are dangerous. As with most temptations, the damage comes not from a single betrayal but the insidious and slippery-slope way they influence behaviors and undermine a university's core values.

Bok begins with the clearest example of where commercialization has harmed higher education: university sports. Drawing on the extensive investigations in books such as *The Game of Life* (Bowen and Shulman, 2002), Bok paints a tawdry picture of exploited students, debased academic standards, and demagogic coaches. Here, the clear losers are the students – not only the athletes, who graduate with very little of a college education; but also the non-athletes, who feel that the college cares more about sports than scholarship.

Bok then discusses the temptations faced by researchers, when companies approach them to test and validate the quality of new products. The problems in aligning the incentives of professors with those of company managers are – Bok argues – ones of secrecy and bias. These are really the same problem: company managers have no incentive to publicize results that detract from their product and will write this into a contract funding research. Unfavorable information is suppressed ('secrecy') and overly favorable information is promoted ('bias'). Undoubtedly, there are cases where the research has been distorted to fit the priorities of a private company, and many of these will distortions will be subtle. But, professors have a strong incentive to publish, even if their results are negative. Also it is important to bear in mind what the company is buying when it contracts with academic researchers, rather than conducting its own tests. The company is buying credibility for its product, and that is not simply obtained by getting a university imprimatur without the substantive aspects of credibility (transparency, methodological excellence, etc.). It is the latter that, ultimately, the company is paying for and it is in the company's best interests to get what it pays for. In-house research is more likely to be secretive/biased, and so getting the universities involved is likely on net to promote disclosure/unbiasedness.

The third temptation is in teaching. Here, commercialization has taken the form of universities selling their instruction in new ways, such as through the internet or through extension programs. Bok argues – and identifies several high-profile case studies to support this view – that higher education provision through the internet has been a financial black hole: millions of dollars poured in, with little or no impact. These internet programs are the clearest and sharpest example of what may happen to instructional services when colleges are tempted to go beyond their core business.

So, Bok's story is one of naïve hope that colleges could respond successfully to the temptations to offer other services in sports, in research, and in teaching. But it is also a warning that the naivety persists, because of how universities are managed and organized: as Bok concludes: "the structure of governance in most universities is not equal to the challenge of resisting the excesses of commercialization" (p.185).

Unfortunately, possible reforms – that trustees should do more, that faculty should have greater oversight – are equally hopeful. But, Bok may be correct to warn that this is a problem that affects the whole higher education system and that if universities continue to commercialize they will continue to jeopardize their core functions of teaching and scholarship. Ahead, then, lies a path of dissonance: temptation and – perhaps – denial.

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April, 2003