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Critical Review of the Chronicle of Higher Education “Fix Nonprofit Higher Ed First” article

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Introduction:

Andrew Smith famously said "people fear what they do not understand". The statement epitomizes the behavior of many individuals towards the for-profit sector of higher education. In today's higher education landscape, there has been an increase attention in the postsecondary organizations that operate as a "for-profit" tax status. The for-profit or "proprietary" sector of higher education has been around since the 1800s and has served a vast constituency of students. However over the last two decades, several for-profit higher education corporations have seen huge enrollment surges and successful initial public offerings (IPOs) on the New York Stock Exchange and NASDAQ which has sparked a controversy about the "business" of higher education throughout the field. Some historians call the rise of these organizations as a new evolution of American Higher Education while others have spoken negatively about the sector and accuse them of "making profits off the back of students" (Ruch, 2001). Marc Bousquet, a tenured associate professor at Santa Clara University and author of *How the University Works*, has provided an editorial column in the Chronicle of Higher Education titled "*Fix Nonprofit Higher Ed First*" on the controversy.

Fix Nonprofit Higher Ed

Marc Bousquet questions the hypocrisy that is widespread in higher education and which sector of the field has influenced the other in "*Fix Nonprofit Higher Ed First*". Bousquet looks at the current state of higher education and speaks harshly on the for-profit sector as he states "the for-profits are just as bad as they say". The negativity is not isolated towards the for-profit institutions as Bousquet believes the for-profits have adopted the appalling behavior exemplified by the nonprofit higher education sector. Bousquet explains the three most significant displays of these corrupt tactics are: the hiring of under qualified faculty, outrageous tuition charges, and mismanagement of capital. One mission of nearly every educational institution (regardless of for-profit or non-profit status) is to offer quality education by fostering excellence in teaching. However, Bousquet believes the nonprofits have lost their way over the last few decades where "...management dominated hiring and evaluation of the majority of the faculty and student instructors is capricious, ill-informed, and aimed at hiring the cheapest and most docile faculty, not the best". He affirms that before the nonprofit sector of higher education can speak negatively about the for-profit sector, they must re-assess their behavior and how they've "lost their way". To "fix" higher

education, Bousquet suggest reinstating the peer assessment (tenure system) of faculty or finding a new solution to evaluate teaching quality. He calls for radical change within the field where bringing back tuition free public institutions, raising teaching standards, fostering a more productive teaching system with more individuals on a tenure track, and ensuring students are only employed as "work-study" students in a job that is related to their degree program will return higher education back to its prestige.

The Current De-evolution of Higher Ed?

"Fix Nonprofit Higher Ed First" provides Marc Bousquet a platform to address what he perceives as the ruthless tactics and current de-evolution of the field of higher education. Bousquet perceives both sectors of the industry just as "ruthless" and "bad" as the other. He questions which sector influenced the other and his belief that the nonprofit sector of higher education invented the ills within the industry and the for-profits are merely capitalizing on them. The editorial provides a very negative outlook on the industry as a whole without discussing any of the positive contributions of higher education on our society. Bousquet displays his biases as a tenured faculty member with his perception of what constitutes the most important mission of an institution (teaching centered). The evolution of faculty development where the integration of research into the scholarly role of faculty which has created the dual objectives of teaching and research as missions for the institution was never mentioned in the article.

Bousquet's solution or "fix" for higher education seems very unrealistic and idealistic. He believes his first proposal of making tuition free at public institutions, providing stipends, and raising taxes on whom he calls "the Real Housewives class" will cure the ill of overpriced tuition cost. Currently many states are divesting from funding higher education and placing the burden of cost on the student and families through tuition. By calling for free tuition at public institutions, Bousquet is calling for an unrealistic proposal that would require an enormous political hurdle throughout the states. He also strangely decides a "fix" for the system of higher education is the placement process of work-study students. This "solution" has absolutely no connection to the argument regarding "nonprofit and for-profit". This proposal has little connection to the rest of his argument regarding the current system. The only realistic suggestion Bousquet proposes is in regards to the raising the standards for the qualification, training, and continuing professional development of all faculty. As a faculty member at Santa Clara University, he is successfully able to express his viewpoint that the institutions need to maintain a better support system to groom and maintain a high level of excellence in their faculty members.

Same Industry, Two Separate Missions

The overall theme of Bousquet's editorial is that the nonprofit sector is just as "evil" as the for-profit sector of higher education. Members of non-profit higher education organizations

have an elitist view that the for-profit institutions are “ruthless” or “crooks”. This type of negative perspective is rooted in a lack of understanding the sector. Bousquet does not clarify the point that propriety institutions have existed in the United States since the 1800s to the benefit of specific groups of students which are under-served at the public and nonprofit institutions. He fails to bring to the forefront the characteristics and models maintained by many for-profit institutions which has influenced the higher education industry as a whole. The nonprofit sector may continue to display an elitist view but have adopted some form of the for-profit model (responding to market forces, adjusting the organizational structure and governance, and developing a strong customer orientation). Institutions such as Stanford, Columbia, New York University, Cornell, the University of Maryland and Temple University have established “for-profit” continuing education ventures (Ruch, 2001). Also, many nonprofit institutions like Saint Mary’s College, Lesley College, Baker University, and William Penn College have adopted the for-profit model in the creation of educational programs for working adult (Sperling & Tucker, 1997). The failure of a true discussion of the separate cultures and missions of the “traditional” nonprofit college versus the for-profit colleges weakens Bousquet’s argument on the subject.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Bousquet’s article “*Fix Nonprofit Higher Ed First*” allows for a discussion regarding the perceived “evils” of the current higher education landscape. Bousquet argues that the for-profit sector is not to blame for the recent controversial aspects of the industry (tuition rising higher than inflation, the deterioration of the tenure system, mismanagement, questionable admissions practices). He believes the nonprofit sector invented and has influenced the for-profits’ current bad practices and the blame should be placed on the whole industry to change. Unfortunately, Bousquet does not present a truly informative discussion and provides unrealistic solutions to the problematic issues in higher education. The industry of higher education is continually evolving and both sectors (nonprofit and profit) can be influenced by the other to create change and innovation.

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