

Why quality matters in higher education

by Tom Auxter, President, United Faculty of Florida



IN 2013, the Florida Legislature passed HB 7029 and thereby opened the door, if the bill is fully implemented by the 2014 Legislature, for corporations to design and produce courses for university and college students to take and to test and grade the students. In other words, corporations would be able to sell students online courses counting toward graduation from a Florida university or college.

When we look at the practice of corporations selling courses to students, we do not find examples of excellence in higher education. What we find is not even good. The last decade of explosive commercial growth reveals a lot about how corporations enter the market and how their “career colleges” affect students’ lives.

What is the track record of for-profit colleges? Sen. Tom Harkin, who chaired the U.S. Senate’s Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, conducted an investigation that revealed for-profit career colleges do not reliably keep promises to produce high-paying careers for students, or even help students complete degree programs for that matter. The only things they are reliable about are spending more money on advertising than instruction and producing average profits of 20%. Do we really want to make wholesale commitments to corporate initiatives based on this evidence?

The proponents of a corporate package deal hype the quality of the product but sidestep issues of the quality of the instruction in the package they expect us to buy. The one-size-fits-all model they promote does not give us “high quality.” What we get is merely a talking head lecturing on a screen, computer games designed for a student to play, and quizzes that supposedly test whether the student “got it” for a “component” of a course. This leaves out most of what counts in the quality of instruction.

For quality we need a live instructor who knows the research, answers all the questions students ask, and takes students to new levels of understanding. They need a real person

who can interact with them to find out how much of the material they understand, how to diagnose and remedy individual learning problems on the spot, and how to adjust the pace for the class. There is no substitute for a qualified faculty member who responds to creative questions with individually-tailored answers – challenging students to follow up with investigation and independent research.

What students need for a strong future is also what businesses need for success in a global economy. Students benefit from a transformational college experience that develops independent thinking when encountering new situations. Businesses look for employees ready to use critical thinking and communication skills – comparing alternatives and finding the best one – for innovation to occur. Problem-solving is more than simply reacting in the same way to something seen previously.

Encouraging independent thinking and innovation is essential for developing students into successful and resilient lifelong learners as well as for creating an economy in Florida that is up to the economic challenges we face. The quality of instruction in the classroom is what makes the difference. Replacing this instruction with substandard commercial products is not the path to prosperity.

The aggressive legislative action campaign UFF members carried out against HB 7029 in spring 2013 had one positive effect: all the critical questions faculty asked about the feasibility of the plan slowed down implementation of the bill until spring 2014. This gives faculty time to contact senators now.

We need faculty to step up and make our voices heard in Tallahassee. It will be our last chance to stop this political juggernaut during a time that we still have legislators in office pushing these goals. In November 2014 we will have a chance to eliminate the legislators who support the corporate takeover of higher education as well as a governor who will sign this legislation. By voting in August and November we can weaken the potential for future legislative acts of destruction.

Meanwhile we will have the fight of our professional lives to stop the momentum this spring. Add your voice to those urging Florida senators to oppose any plan to introduce inferior corporate products into the curriculum. **FEA**

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If we’re going to be true to our mission to be the united voice for excellence in public education, if we’re going to advocate for the right to a free, high quality public education for all – it’s going to take teamwork. For that we need to be

united and we need to work as a team. That unity is a responsibility of membership in FEA.

There are many out there who see our students as the means to making a profit. They’re seeking to divide us at every juncture. They see all of us as an obstacle to their total control of educa-

tion in this state. And we are an obstacle, a big one. Because we believe in our students and because we believe in the incredible value of true public education to our communities, to our state and to our nation, we will not let it happen. **FEA**