Analysis of David Kirp’s “Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line: The Marketing of Higher Education”

Linzy Martinelli

Pennsylvania State University
Higher education today may be undergoing some major changes that can be attributed to a couple changes in values. It can be seen that there is a growing drive for prestige that has begun to shape the actions of universities. The growing circulation and reliance on the U.S. News and World Report System is the driving force behind this desire for prestige. Finally, this is all a result of the marketization of higher education where prestige is the first place prize, selectivity is road to achieve it, and it would appear that there is no limit to the steps universities will take to be on top. David Kirp writes on this subject in his book entitled, “Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line: The Marketing of Higher Education.” He offers his own concerns and questions about providing for the private gain of individuals and corporations and the need to protect the common good and claims that he is uncertain where the future of higher education lies and only suggests that big changes are being made that will shape it. The state of higher education leaves one to question if these changes will benefit students.

Kirp quotes former University of Chicago president Robert Maynard Hutchins as he comments on what accommodating to the market might mean stating "when an institution determines to do something in order to get money, it must lose its soul." However, Kirp himself neither suggests that the marketing of higher education is a positive or negative providing the reader with both descriptions of the impressive successes of some experiments as well as a warning that to let market influences shape higher education is "a default of institutional leadership and an abandonment of the idea of a university's mission." We know colleges and universities to be carriers of important values of free inquiry and authentic, purposeful scholarship that serve society and represent a common good; students should seek to learn and express these values and faculty should articulate and personify these values. Therefore it is the
management of these values, rather than accounting for the bottom line, that should worry us and that should motivate our leaders. However, the reality is that higher education has become a business and in America, business lives or perishes by the marketplace so what does that mean for higher education?

The issue we are finding is that for one thing, historically, the values that were embedded in the very idea of the university are the values that the market of today does not honor. Values including “the belief in a community of scholars and not a confederacy of self-seekers; in the idea of openness and not ownership; in the professor as pursuer of truth and not an entrepreneur; and in the student as an acolyte whose preferences are to be formed, not a consumer whose preferences are to be satisfied” (p. 7). It would appear as if the values of the university are being compromised by the changing market of higher education. In accordance, Kirp offers Clark Kerr’s idea that today is the greatest critical age for higher education, and with the diversity of demands from students, faculty, and stakeholders higher education has been transformed into a site of academic capitalism. These transformations stem from “new educational technologies, a generation of students with different desires and faculty with different demands; a new breed of rivals that live or die by the market; the incessant demand for more funds and new revenue sources to replace the ever-shrinking proportion of public support; and a genuinely global market in minds” (p. 6). One might offer that many of these changes may be very necessary for universities to survive and in turn question if with a country so focused on a higher standard of living, financial security, and social mobility is the desire for higher education to fulfill a vocation means to an end truly negative? Many of the critics would suggest that it is, and I would agree.
The ideals of communities of scholars, openness of knowledge and research, professors as seekers of truth and students as seekers of diverse views may have seemed very important but with these new changes these ideals have been abandoned to make way for the new demand in higher education which resides in the need for a useful and usable education. This generation of incoming students are seeking an education that can directly result in a career. Universities are a business and every aspect of the university reflect the business-like ways of thinking “each department is a ‘revenue center’ each student a customer, each professor an entrepreneur, each party a ‘stakeholder,’ and each institution a seeker after profit, whether in money capital or intellectual capital” (4). Some believe that higher education is a place for educators to tell people what is important to know because students do not have the knowledge to decide what is important. However, if we are to look at students as consumers then like all other businesses in America, colleges and universities should alter somewhat in their offerings to meet this need, because who is better to decide what the public needs than the public itself? A market is a means for allocation of scarce goods, there is more demand for goods than there are goods themselves. Therefore, the value of a good “the curriculum” is determined by the market. However, the reality is that these selfish desires putting stress on these institutions may be hindering students rather than helping.

According to Kirp, money has always been involved in higher education or the term legacy would not have a meaning specific to universities, and “the ‘sellers’ in this particular market, the universities, seek out the most attractive ‘buyers,’ that is the students. ‘the university’s consumers are one of the most important inputs in its production process’” (p. 3). In order for institutions to gain the most attractive ‘buyers,’ they seem to jump through all sorts of hoops to increase their prestige to remain competitive in the marketplace of today including
changing the university’s name to fudging the statistics on SAT scores. It is no wonder why this is the case when one considers that fact that prestige brings with it tangible benefits; top students, top professors, bigger gifts, larger research grants, and lucrative industry contracts, which in turn reinforce the schools ranking. With respect to this several questions arise; What is the rationale behind ranking different types of universities on the same scale? Has this lead us to leave the fate of our future in the hands of a select few at U.S. News and World Report? What is the moral line? Is outright deception morally wrong or just good business? Does it teeter on the idea that if there were no consequences, everything is ok or does equity and equal opportunity still matter?

This further magnifies the issue of inequity in higher education. The gap in access for students is increasing as the competition among universities for selectivity increases. Smoke and mirrors methods of access for students are shielding the fact that low-income students are not really getting in. Duke may be persuading more and more students to apply to the school but the motivation for Duke lies in the fact that as a result, Duke admissions have more applicants to reject making it appear as if it is even more selective. Also, schools highly support the idea of early admission because in most cases, 100% of the students that the school wants also want the school. This fact suggests that the school is more selective because they have a high percentage of accepted applicants attending as well as not having to entice these students with high financial packages. The uncertainty in financial aid makes it less likely for students from low-income families to apply early. When you have competition you have unfair advantages placed on opportunities in the marketing and branding of the university and on the other side the need for the ‘consumers’ or students to market themselves as well. Kirp suggests this might increase the gap in access for students when those who already have the means to attend universities of higher learning also have the means to market themselves more favorably to the school.
One might lament that this way of thinking just adds to the already intense issue that the university is concerned with too many other things that undergraduate education is getting pushed to the wayside. What will happen to the transition of knowledge? Even faculty are influenced by this market trend where they are now being persuaded by competing offers in salary, research support, and limited teaching obligations to name a few which can only further affect the ever decreasing importance on undergraduate education. Kirp states that considering all the above, “it’s no wonder then, that raising research money, negotiating patent rights, and establishing a presence on the Internet are contact sports” (p. 5). The consumers, that is the students, have also altered their demands deciding that rather than a liberal arts education that was praised before, now a more “practical” vocationally focused education is now seen as ideal. This demand has been transferred to the universities who now have needed to change their offerings to meet this need as well as compete with the growing for-profit sector that have been designed to meet the needs of these types of demands and have also specialized in specific fields.

Moreover, it appears as if a mismatch has occurred between the needs society has placed on higher education and what it is receiving, especially with respect to the value of the undergraduate education. One fear is that students are not receiving the most crucial skills needed for success in the professional world, the very world in which students are trying to enter, including communication skills, writing skills, critical thinking skills, and civic responsibility. A general education can serve many beneficial purposes including exposure to many areas of study that require the development of these necessary skills for success. All of these skills contribute to the potential success of an individual in the workforce. Delbanco claims that liberal education has the capacity to challenge the young to find themselves and should stimulate critical thinking to promote ideas much deeper than regurgitation or experiential anecdotes. These ideals
are impeded by the push for increases in scientific research and the pressures of market-driven measures of educational productivity. To which Delbanco stresses,

“science… tells us nothing about how to shape a life or how to face death, about the meaning of love or the scope of responsibility. It not only fails to answer such questions; it cannot ask them. … Such questions do not admit of verifiable or replicable answers because the experiment to which we must subject them is the experiment of our own lives.”

Without exposure to a variety of subjects and diverse individuals, students are missing the opportunity for development of these skills as well as the opportunity to become competitive members of the global workforce. Furthermore, general education courses can offer more than an introduction to a wide variety of studies in which students learn necessary skills. This introduction leads to a path of true enlightenment in which students are exposed to subjects and studies that they might normally not have a chance to explore. This exploration can expose students to subjects that they do and do not enjoy, both of which are equally important. It is not uncommon for students to change their major several times before they graduate and these changes can at times be triggered by a class or experience that the student enjoyed. Without the opportunity to have access to classes outside their original major these altered paths may take longer to be realized costing students more time and money.

While some may find Kirp to be promoting the market approach to university management, he suggests that big changes are being made that will shape it, and claims that he is uncertain where the future of higher education lies but that theses changes will shape its future. He neither suggests that the marketing of higher education is a positive or negative providing
the reader with both descriptions of the impressive successes of some experiments as well as a warning that to let market influences shape higher education is "a default of institutional leadership and an abandonment of the idea of a university's mission." Kirp even offers his own concerns and questions concerning providing for the private gain of individuals and corporations by charging market rates for the products of professors' work and the need to protect the common good by arranging subsidies for the things that enrich society but that do not pay for themselves such as the humanities. Lacks a true analysis of the issue by Kirp as he instead offers a series of narratives to provide evidence. The case-study method permits exploration of the many complexities facing the higher education landscape without summarizing but its focus may be too anecdotal and sporadic rather than on the abstract patterns which are to be analyzed further. One may wish to hear suggestions on how to improve the fate of higher education but what Kirp offers is the difficulty in providing this because of the ambiguity of what the effects may be.

Both the schools and the students appear to be playing the market; parents are willing to pay big bucks to market their students to university admissions, and some schools are willing to undergo a complete makeover including changing their name to be recognized. One might question, is renaming a school abandoning the schools history and tradition or just a well thought out business practice and how might promoting the idea that the school is synonymous with ‘fun’ say about the schools academic priorities? It appears as if the market is winning this battle but the implications that it has and will have on undergraduate education will shortchange our students and only further hinder their opportunity to be a successful member of the global workforce. Consequently, in order to save the value of the undergraduate education and preserve the importance of a well-rounded education that prepares students for a promising career,
universities need to stop giving in to market pressures and hold fast to their original mission of education; a task that will not be easy and sadly will most likely not occur.