

EDITORIAL

Privatization of Public Education: The Real Weapons of Mass Destruction

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The cost of finding out that Saddam Hussein, as most of the world suspected, harbored no stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction has cost us well over \$100 billion in the past year. This sum is greater than the total amount budgeted for NIH, NSF, and the entire U.S. Department of Education, combined. This massive expenditure comes at a time when state-funded universities are facing dire economic conditions, with many of them forced to cut or eliminate academic programs. Unfortunately, this only represents the tip of the iceberg, because we have not begun to pay this huge and steadily growing war debt. In fact, employing a new version of voodoo economics, President Bush continues to propose further tax cuts, which will ultimately pass these costs on for several generations. With these spend-and-charge denial tactics, many states are already feeling the pressure of some lost revenues, and higher education has been taking big hits in several states across the country.

My state, Michigan, is fairly typical of what is happening in many other states. Specifically, as state allocations for higher education decline, there is an increased pressure for public universities to hike their tuition. This has led to a privatization of public education, with more potentially destructive consequences than all of the defunct missiles buried in the sands of Iraq. The most obvious fallout is that fewer students will be able to afford a college education. The irony of this situation is that many state leaders acknowledge that having a college degree is as important for employment opportunities today as having a high school diploma was 30 years ago. In fact, the governor of Michigan has recently appointed a commission with the charge of finding a way to double the number of citizens in our state who earn a college degree in the next 10 years, because Michigan is well behind the national average in this category. Unfortunately, the state legislature has continuously decreased its allocations to higher education while submitting to public pressure by placing caps on tuition increases. This has led to the dependence of more of our state institutions on another potentially dangerous weapon: commercialization of the academy.

Although commercialization is not inherently evil, it is a very dangerous path and many colleges and universities are now treading across this very slippery slope, often with the blessings, encouragement, and even unbridled enthusiasm of its board members. The dream of a quick economic fix often blinds university officials from seeing the potential mass destruction this path may bring to the institution and to its values with which they have been entrusted. The caveats of commercialization are well documented in a new book, *"Buying In or Selling Out?"* by Donald Stein and a distinguished group of educational leaders who attended the Conference on Commercialization of the Academy, held at Emory

University in April 2002. Many FUN members have already experienced some of the negative effects of commercialization when they are told by presenters at the Society for Neuroscience meeting that they are not allowed to divulge crucial information because of proprietary concerns. Some of us have wrestled with restrictions placed on publications of studies funded by pharmaceutical companies or biotechnology firms. Some of us have even re-directed our line of research in an effort to obtain much-needed funding, sometimes by-passing important basic research. These and many other negative consequences of commercialization are becoming more and more common because of the increasing loss of public support for education and research.

Many FUN members may feel somewhat immune to these pressures, especially if they are at a well-endowed private college with ample teaching and research support. Admittedly, the impact may not be quite as severe, but the potential backlash may cause considerable hardships at many private colleges as well. For example, the state of Michigan has proposed dropping its scholarship support for students who attend private colleges in the state. This would amount to a \$65 million cut to private colleges in Michigan, and would affect nearly half the students at schools like Albion College, where former FUN President, Jeff Wilson is teaching. Unfortunately, this may be just the beginning. Undoubtedly, it will become increasingly difficult for both private and public colleges to garner research funds from the shrinking pool of federal dollars. The pressure of providing overheads to help support budgets at public institutions is growing enormously and the already intense competition for limited resources will become even more intense. Unfortunately, and the pool of available money will not be able to grow proportionately, as we begin to pay down the huge national debt we are building.

Although the world is better off without Saddam Hussein, the price we are paying for going it alone is enormous. The search for weapons of mass destruction has yielded at least one: the increasing privatization of public education. The political and economic decisions we make at the national, state, and institutional levels can have severe, long-term, inter-related consequences. As individual faculty members and, collectively as members of FUN, we cannot afford to bury our heads in the sand. We need to speak out when our institutional officials are contemplating perilous directions for our academies, and we need to express our opinions to our state and national legislators on issues that have potentially devastating effects on the future of our lives and those of our students.