

# Managed Education

Ilene A. Serlin, Ph.D., ADTR

**T**he recent explosion of distance education and commercialization of information has serious implications for the field of psychology, and our identity as psychologists. Reflecting on these trends can help us re-examine our values and approach these new trends with some wisdom.

What is managed education and why is it a problem for psychologists? Managed education shares with managed care the principle that the bottom line is profit, and like the regulation of managed care, regulation of education is done best by business. Motivation to build a managed education system is high. Recent figures show higher education to be a high stakes \$228 billion business. Huge corporations like Motorola University are creating "corporate universities", offering more affordable work/study options and practical training. Describing what they call the "corporatization of higher education," the American Association of University Professors explains, "Indeed, in an information society, the creation, publication, and promulgation of knowledge are no longer the work of a single individual. These are corporate activities, decided by corporate planning, and answerable to corporate measurements" (Mary Burgan, Fall, 2000).

The rhetoric of managed education gives clues about its central metaphors: "students as consumers or customers", "productivity", "outcome measures", "cost-effective", "efficiency", and "hi-tech." Its increasingly utilitarian curriculum will, like a traditional medical school curriculum, fragment into psychological specialties. Each of these specialties may come with a manual, and can be taught by any psychologist. Information is put on the Web,

wrapped as a "course in a box." Curriculum content is written by a few highly paid intellectual "superstars" and owned by companies. Other faculty are hired and fired "at will", as in a small business. They may be adjuncts or recent graduates of our schools, competing with each other for courses to teach. They work on contract, with few benefits and little security. They commute or telecommute, working alone.

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At risk, among other things, is the school's mission statement and academic rigor. In a recent article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, University of California at San Francisco researchers Elizabeth Boyd and Lisa Bero wrote, "There is a growing concern that industry sponsorship may influence the outcomes of research and undermine traditionally held academic values of intellectual freedom, open exchange of ideas, and research in the interest of the public good" (cited in *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*, March 21-27, 2001, pp. 12-15).

In addition, corporate interests will increasingly shape curriculum, traditionally the domain of faculty. This means that students will be moved quickly through the system. Information will be more important than critical and creative thinking skills. Information will be packaged and pushed like prescriptions through the system, designed to meet specializations and certificate

programs. These programs may be market driven, or addressed to the "illness of the day." The same people who package will market the information systems, creating requirements and guidelines to administer the information. It is these same people that will be making the profits. Courses that are not profitable, presumably the ones in the social sciences and the humanities, will be cut.

Jeopardizing academic freedom is risky business. Right now, private universities, including the professional schools, can come under California "at will" business law, meaning that most academics are not protected and can be hired and fired at will. Recently, a ruling from the US Supreme Court limiting worker's rights to sue jeopardizes faculty rights even further.

Loss of faculty involvement in decisions regarding curriculum, budget, and hiring reduces faculty professionalism and rewards compliance.

The strongly competitive edge of today's world, combined with growing existential insecurity, create an ever more individualistic culture. Entrepreneurism is rewarded; loyalty to the group is not. Insecurity is a reality-in the California State University system. For example, while student attendance increased 35,000 between 1994-1995 and 1999-2000, faculty numbers increased by ONE full-time equivalent and 1462 temporary faculty (cited in *California Faculty*, Spring 2001).

The loss of professionalism is, at heart, an issue of identity. Who are we if we are not professionals? Robert Birnbaum, in *Management Fads in Higher Education: Where They Come From, What They Do, Why They Fail*, powerfully

