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Should a School be a Business? (or) What is Education?

I once heard a business professor make reference to the “product mix” of his school. Many readers will have heard such things at their American colleges or universities. These and similar remarks inadvertently remind us that the distinctive character of an educational organization is in need of recognition and defense—in our financially driven (read “obsessed”) times. Few would deny that a barrel could be used as a skirt; is it therefore equivalent to a skirt? Few would doubt that a new-born child could be called the product of a household; is it therefore a product? Although such analogies can be drawn, does this endow them with propriety or make them legitimate? Why did Jesus not like being called “Rabbi”? Wasn’t he a Rabbi of sorts? Sometimes the differences out-weight the similarities in an analogy. The queen may be a princess but a very different sort of one; if you speak of her as a princess you miss most of what makes her a queen. It is easy to miss and fail to honor what makes a person or thing uniquely itself.

Why is a school or a college not a business, and why are students not customers or consumers? The reason people organize together into schools is to help students learn, to gain insight, to become educated and changed—hopefully in the light of God’s Word. Their goal is not to make money or even to pay their own bills—most exist thanks to gifts, grants, and subsidies; they are not there to make a profit, “grow the business,” or “increase market share.” They are not organized for the purpose of perpetuating themselves as financial units, or at least not traditionally. No such goals are theirs, not what makes them tick. A school is not a business and should not be operated as a business; its raison d’etre, its nature and end as an organization (of teachers and learners), is to pass on, to give away what the Lord has given to the already educated—hand it on to the next generation of young people. When a school or college starts talking and thinking of its work as intrinsically anything other than educational, it will have lost sight of it peculiar and distinctive calling.¹

Schools, like all other organizations, exist in a world where economics is a reality, but that’s not

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part of their defining purpose. If business principles
are allowed to guide decisions and dictate priorities
in schools, mistaken characteristics and motives will
appear that tend to compromise or corrupt their
founding educational purpose. Money must change
hands and bills must be paid but just as families and
churches are not characterized financially, so edu-
cational institutions operate with a different goal
and organizing principle. We see the difference in
a word like “tuition,” which does not mean pay or
money; it comes from the Latin verb “to look at” or
“look after.” Tuition is supposed to be used to look
after the needs of the teacher; it is not strictly speak-
ing offered as “pay.” If it were simply pay, it would
most often be unfair pay in view of the required
qualifications and value of teaching.

Have I been too quick in rejecting the analogies
between business and school, product and educa-
tion, tuition and pay? Let’s try again. Perhaps the
product of a school or college is a certain kind of
“insight,” intellectual-spiritual maturation, along
with various “skills.” You pay us money and we
give you knowledge, maturation and skill. It is
obvious, at least to most teachers, that this is not
how it works; it isn’t possible to simply “give” these
things in the way things are handed to you in a
store. Neither is it the same as receiving the “filling”
the dentist “puts” in your tooth, or the pill the phar-
macist puts into your hands. And it is not like the
experience that entertainers or movie makers offer
while we are watching or thinking about their show.
What about the “product” of the exercise club? Such
clubs typically have one or two trainers and many
members. After receiving pointers from the trainer,
most members work out alone, whereas teachers
must keep coming back to give more and more
instruction, trying to take the student deeper and
deeper, layer by layer, to discover more and more
about the world—for themselves. What the student
does and or has done when a class is all over is invis-
able. It cannot be seen. It can only be approximately
assessed and tentatively recognized.

It also evident that our “product” is not infor-
mation. Encyclopedias, documentaries and the In-
ternet offer that in a greater abundance than any
school or teacher ever could. Nor is it the mere
“handling” of knowledge that schools teach, for un-
less there is understanding of information, the sig-
nificance and connections of knowledge will remain
in the dark.

Is our “product” our words? To start with, pre-
cious few of our words or even sentences are really
our own, so this would make us all bootleggers and
plagiarists if words were considered “our product.”
Moreover, such an “answer” loses sight of what is
essential to education, i.e., thought, thinking and
understanding. Students are not just being tested on
their word-parroting skill but on their judgment-
making abilities, using acquired concepts. The idea
that we are selling words (or vocabulary) also fails
since learning is not something that can be “given.”

Must we finally admit that teachers, schools,
colleges and universities have no product? Well,
perhaps we sell a “service” to our students. Isn’t our
product the labor of talking, writing, composing ex-
ams, listening to and reading what students write—
grading exams? If that idea is correct, there would
still be no “product” (since “goods and services” are
usually distinguished). As such, educators would be
merely day (or night) labors paid for their service
hourly.

Education is something less tangible than labor.
People can “labor at it” with little or no effect—it
takes a very distinctive type of attention and con-
centration that can then yield a distinctive affection
in the learner. The recognition of the ideas and dis-
tinctions behind the assembled words is what we
aim at, our purpose and goal—which means that
education involves cognitive movement or change.
Would it be correct to say we sell change, changed
minds, changed people? In the normal sense I think
not. A person is not heavier or lighter, weaker or
stronger by it; rather the student is altered in inde-
cipherable ways, reordered inside through the effort
he or she makes. The student becomes capable of
judging things about which he or she was formerly
ignorant, of discerning what is and is not (true).
Awareness of this change can foster either humil-
ity and thankfulness or arrogance and hubris. The
broadened basis (or horizon) can further illuminate
or blunt a person’s perception of the truth. This ca-
pacity is most strikingly evident in its absence, that
is, when we and the student have failed, when the
student leaves as he came, when she remains unal-
tered, unmoved, unaffected.

To educate is to connect and to disconnect be-
To learn is to explicate the nature of our various kinds of subjection to law and to divine ordinances.

Various kinds of subjection to law and to divine ordinances. This learning can offer the possibility of various degrees of liberation, making us able to plan for, cooperate with, and “harness” the regularities of human and non-human nature. Education can mitigate slavishness and disclose possible ways of flourishing but it can also lead to hubris, arrogance and the misuse of power over things, animals, other people and self. When organized on business principles, education tends to be narrowed down to learning for instrumental purposes, that is, as a way to acquire power, influence, and wealth instead of learning for the sake of good stewardship by means of understanding and admiring the work and wisdom of God (or even “serviceable insight”).

Conclusion
Educational institutions can be said to have a “product” in only a very indirect sense. The way a school is organized and run should reflect its character, purpose and distinctive reason for existing. Its first and primary goal is learning, which is an intrinsic good, requiring no further justification beyond gratitude to God. This goal should be and has usually been honored. Educational institutions receive support from a wide variety of sources, all of whom should be obliged to keep their distance, none of whom should try to direct teaching or research activities. This is a matter of respect for the nature of the learning process and trust in the people engaged in it. Such respect will serve everyone best.

We often find in the vicinity of colleges and universities a concentration of innovative and prosperous businesses. This is not coincidental, not because schools are businesses in disguise, but because the knowledge and insight generated in them is useful—enabling graduates with initiative to start companies and run very successful businesses. The teaching and primary research done at schools and universities prepares the way for ideas, products, and people to contribute to innovative forms of production. Recognition of their indebtedness to educational institutions (and God) should cause the people and companies assisted by them to make gifts and subsidies available with no strings attached. A school’s dependence requires trust and faith—a trust intrinsic to any Christian (educational) institution and the faith needed to guard against trying to turn a school into a business or self-centered power base.

Endnote
1. I am told that James K. A. Smith has written a similar article—which I have not yet read—called “Are Students ‘Consumers’?” in The Devil Reads Derrida (Eerdmans, 2009).