

English Studies and the University Experience as Intellectual Property: Commodification and the Spellings Report

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Public Abstract

In 2005 Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings commissioned a group largely composed of business representatives to study higher education and recommend changes in national policy and direction. The group documented and suggested policy changes to address some disturbing trends including the rising cost of higher education. Today, increasing numbers of students can't afford college even though studies show that it is one of the best financial investments people can make. Although it pinpoints important problems, the Spellings commission's report offers no program to address the rising cost of education and fails to acknowledge the fact that, over the last fifteen years, states have systematically decreased the percentage of funding for public colleges and universities. As a result land grant institutions, for instance, have become increasingly dependent on private funding sources such as tuition, alumni contributions, and corporate research. They will be forced to act more and more like private schools.

Perhaps most important, the report misrepresents both students and faculty, treating them as commodities and undervaluing them and their work. Students, for example, are described as units of wealth that the university produces for the economy, without mentioning their value as citizens and family members. Faculty are misrepresented as well, described as "complacent" and uncaring, even as those in my discipline (technology-enhanced writing instruction) work to offer individualized instruction, to encourage students to work on real-life communication projects, and to teach students both the value and the dangers of new communication technologies. To confront the misrepresentations of the Spelling's Report, teachers in higher education need to reconnect with the public, something they have failed to do in the past. The public should know what the teachers and scholars in higher education are doing for young people and for returning adult learners. Faculty should also "push back" against the language that corporations and Washington bureaucrats are using to describe our work. In order to reconnect and push back, faculty can try the following forms of activism:

- Join and support the national organizations representing them in Washington D.C. , such as the National Council of Teachers of English and the Modern Language Association.

- Articulate for themselves and for others what each holds most dear about their teaching and research, and connect this to public values.
- Write short descriptions (like these paragraphs) with each journal article they publish or each conference presentation they deliver to explain the essence of their work to the public.
- Publish these short descriptions in newspapers and electronic venues across the country to explain the teaching and research they do.

English Studies and the University Experience as Intellectual Property: Commodification and the Spellings Report

Is the Secretary Spellings' commissioned report on the Future of Higher Education (Spellings, A Test) good news for English studies technophiles like myself? I'll answer with an unequivocal, "No."

At first glance the report appears to acknowledge some of the conditions that we value:

- Access to learning and education should be available at any time, anywhere.
- Life-long learning is a priority.
- The creative use of new, networked systems (what we might call writing systems) is assumed and encouraged.

I could easily read the report and tell myself, "Well, I'm doing my part as I ask my students to look carefully at the affordances of technology-enhanced literacy practices:

- How do we read, research and search?
- How do we collect, manage, and configure information?
- How do we interact with coworkers and colleagues (and family)?
- How do we use, pass on knowledge, and collaborate?
- How do we publish our work?
- How do we attend to the rhetorical and intellectual needs of our many audiences?
- How do we learn new systems and carefully integrate them into our working and private lives and the working practices of our institutions?

Technologies increasingly intervene constantly in this recursive communicative matrix. The Computers and Writing community, like few others that I'm aware of, tries to help students understand those interventions as important influences on the rhetorical nature of their communication work. We also attend to these interventions in ethical terms, in terms of work place practices, as fiscal events, and as political choices we can make (DeVoss et al, Selfe). I'm proud to be part of this community of scholar/teachers.

But is this report supportive of this work? I think not, and I'll suggest why in the next section. As Paul LeBlanc, president of Southern New Hampshire University, suggested in a recent email exchange, "entities like the Spellings Commission see the changes as an opportunity to impose 'productivity' models that evoke those of the 19th century scientific methods used in factories" (personal communication, email,

January 2, 2007). For this reason and others, those in the English studies disciplines cannot allow commissions of this sort to speak for us.

Commodification

I suggest at the end of this article, practices that are wide in scope. They do not respond only to the Spellings report, which will soon fade in importance. They are my meager attempts to suggest how we might address some of the powerful cultural forces that seem to threaten not only our institutions but the way we teach, the way we help people become reasoning, effective, caring citizens. To see this larger cultural picture, I find it useful to attend to an unfortunate symmetry between intellectual property trends and policy documents of this sort.

English studies programs often make a cultural, individual, or professional difference based on the intellectual property (IP) we help create, help our students create, or help circulate in the culture. Our teaching and scholarship are tied intimately, whether we like it or not, to IP trends. Those same trends also influence political and cultural events, including the Spellings report. So it makes sense then, when concerned about national trends, to attend to the directions that our legal system has been taking intellectual property (IP) law. It should be no surprise to those in our discipline that IP law has become increasingly more restrictive over the last 30 years. We can look to many of our own colleagues (see, Logie, Porter, and many others) and respected colleagues from other disciplines (Lessig) to help us understand that process. However, few people have illustrated the complexity of IP issues as well as Rosemary Coombe.

In *The cultural life of Intellectual Property*, Coombe—through the lenses of several disciplines: cultural studies, intellectual property law, postmodernism, and anthropology—finds the state of affairs troubling but not totalizing.

"The issue here [related to IP] is not one of absolute access [to constructivists public discourse] or absolute prohibition [to that discourse]. ... We need to ask what forms of social relationships with respect to commodified representation will facilitate the expansion of spaces hospitable to expressive articulations that call the social into being by calling it into question" (298). How will IP law influence the way we create "expressive articulations" that look critically at cultural and political changes?

Coombe suggests that IP law does two things to our attempts at "expressive articulations:" First, it wraps copyright holders (largely institutional and corporate holders) in a paranoid, commercially-focused cloak of protection and in that way facilitates commodification of those

representations. But that cloak also generates robust, transient, carnivalesque semiotic systems in which resistant "counterpublics" ("subjects alienated from networks of public expression") have access to what she hopes will become a more democratized cultural life (298).

Coombs would be the first to suggest that we need more carnivalesque counterpublics and fewer cloaks of paranoid protection. Clearly all participants in our culture are affected by the commodification of our work, artifacts, and, increasingly, the intangibles of our lives. Coombe suggests that "commodity fetishism is legally endorsed" (72) and encourages the "judicial inclination to recognize more and more *intangible interests* as forms of property (my emphasis)" (54). The assumption is that "protection means prosperity" (54). So not only are the "things" we produce and use legally commodified, but increasingly even our thoughts, actions, and experiences are being classified as commodities.

I would suggest that the Spellings Commission's comments on the future of HE has tapped into the spirit of IP protectionism and is willingly commodifying all aspects of the university experience.

Coombe's goal was to "open up a vast and relatively unexplored area of social inquiry ... the 'politics of signification' (84)." Her motivation seemed clear: "if what is quintessentially human is the capacity to make meaning, challenge meaning, and transform meaning, then we strip ourselves of our humanity through overzealous application and continuous expansion of intellectual property protections" (84-85). In particular for Computers and Writing specialists, we strip ourselves of opportunities to make, change, and transform meaning making in our classes and in our research.

What Coombe says next, however, is what makes her analysis so troubling and valuable to me. She recognized that *everyone is commercial*. "It is the rare defendant whose activities can be characterized as taking place in a totally noncommercial context" (268). We live in a time "in which identity, tradition and community are themselves constituted through, and in diverse relations to, commodification and its discourses and practices" (272). As a result, those items—identity, tradition, and community—are therefore being described as intellectual property.

For Coombe in this postmodern era, our goal is not to try to step outside of the commodification process. That is impossible. We are part of and complicit in the workings of our own culture. Instead she wants to protect the counterpublics' abilities to construct lifeworlds: "Lifeworlds [that] are

produced through the construction and contestation of meaning" (270). Through these groups she sees the potential to "interpret, recode, or rework media signifiers to express their own identities and aspirations" (271) and in that way remake culture (in a temporary, contingent fashion, of course).

The Computers and Writing community, I think, are one of these counterpublics, or we must become one.

Counterpublics obviously resist the dominant culture through antagonistic rhetorics (via in-your-face demonstrations, for instance). But they often, also, recreate the culture by using some interesting and creative methodologies. Those that Coombe suggests can include

- "ironic appreciation,
- complicitous critique,
- affectionate annoyance,
- sympathetic intervention, and
- grudgingly respectful grievances" (271).

Her object is to make us aware of and encourage the development of counterpublics that can help with the democratization of access to IP. This article is what I suspect she means by "complicitous critique" because the direction that the Spellings report is taking us, is also, to some extent, my direction; their warnings, my responsibility. If you hear a bit of anger in my words, it may be a result of the complicity that I recognize in my own work. If we are all to some extent already commodified, as Coombe suggests, the work I do across the Humanities—introducing scholars and students to online systems—quite possibly makes this process efficient and more likely to occur.

Some Terminology

Before turning to the Spellings commission report, it might be useful to define a few terms to play with as we work our way through some of the implications of the report on the future of higher education. Those terms are commodity, capital, and treasure. I was introduced to them by a good colleague, Dory Noyles, a folklorist at Ohio State University. I like them because, as you'll see later, they recognize our complicity in the process of commodification but move us to act in ways that are not entirely fiscal in nature.

Two of them are common terms in economics. Commodities are units of exchange, materials we create to sell. Typically they are standard units of commerce, interchangeable and replaceable. They represent the items of value that are continuously manufactured to create wealth. It is chilling to think of students and the university experience as commodities defined in

this way. But this is, typically, the way of economists, experts working on IP law, and many college professionals as well.

Capital, on the other hand, (like heavy equipment) is a resource that is supposed to help create commodities or wealth over time. Capital is relatively stable and full of promise. Academics and some of their work, for instance, could be thought of as 'capital:' also a chilling thought. Our research, service, and teaching help produce the students who graduate into to the workplace: we are part of the human capital of colleges and universities.

Treasures, on the other hand, are constantly and socially reconstructed by a community. Some treasures are related to material existence, but the treasures I'm most concerned with here are largely a function of cumulative belief and historical value, what Coombes might call "intangible interests." Beyond their material manifestations, if they have any, their value is self-evident to the communities in which they circulate, even as the treasures themselves often remain difficult to define precisely.

At the Ohio State University, for instance, I would imagine that most students and certainly many alumni would see the football stadium, the 'shoe,' as a material treasure of the university. But what exactly are the treasures I hold most dear here at OSU? One of those treasures is the Digital Media Project that Dr. Scott DeWitt runs in the English department and that I take advantage of when I teach. It is certainly more than the classrooms he and his staff maintain, though they are crucial to our work. It is this community's ethical approach to technology integration, the community of practice they've developed around media studies and the humor surrounding their professional development efforts that are treasures I think worth preserving and promoting. Techno-pedagogical English studies scholars are going to have to begin defining their treasures for themselves and their publics even though that process is likely to construct these "intangible interests as forms of property" (Coombe, 54), as commodities. What commodity, for instance, would I rather stand behind:

1. technological systems as leverage for humor, collegiality, and community building?
OR
2. (as the Spellings report suggests) technology as an efficient method for delivering for-profit units of learning?

I must choose, so I choose #1. Of what value is this commodity that I am standing behind? I don't want to belabor the issue but as soon as I articulate these 'treasures,' I can and will begin using them to recruit

potential graduate students, to “sell” those students on our approach to technology as used in the Rhetoric, Communication, and Literacy program in the department. By circulating this article (as intellectual property), I’m already participating in an exchange system, as Coombe suggests. In this case I have some control over the commodities being circulated. In the next section I try to summarize what is being “sold” by the Spellings commission report to the public and to political policy makers. In spite of the disclaimer on the first page of the report—that I *cannot* infer that the Department of Education and Margaret Spellings herself are officially endorsing this report—their actions belie that disclaimer. They have already started acting on the recommendations of the report.

Spellings Report

After considering the Spellings report (A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education), I am more convinced than ever that those who work in English studies programs (technology studies, literature, English education, ESL, composition, rhetoric, creative writing, professional communication, new media studies, etc.) will have to be the ones to articulate both our values and successes in higher education. We will also have to describe the precise challenges we face as well. A commission of this sort will not do as a spokesperson.

Those on the Spellings commission voiced concerns to which we should attend, but we need to reframe their arguments and take them to our publics in a way that I will characterize as *persistent and relentless*. We need to define our treasures, not so much our institutional treasures, but the intellectual and pedagogical treasures that we bring to each class of students, to each generation of citizens. Why do we need to take on this difficult work in addition to our current responsibilities? It is because of what the Spellings report says about us and the college learning experience.

We are complacent.

“We [have] remained so far ahead of our competitors for so long, however, that we [have begun] to take our postsecondary superiority for granted” (vi). I suppose that could be true in some general sense that is beyond my experience, but complacency is not the word I’d use to describe my ES colleagues’ efforts to reach students, to refine and modify curricula, or to analyze, adopt and adapt new communication technologies for their classes. On the contrary, all these efforts require extraordinary work on the part of individual teachers, departments, and programs.

Students are wasting their time.

Bullet point #3 in their preamble is particularly telling.

“Among high school graduates who do make it on to postsecondary education, a troubling number waste time – and taxpayer dollars – mastering English and math skills that they should have learned in high school. And some never complete their degrees at all, at least in part because most colleges and universities don’t accept responsibility for making sure that those they admit actually succeed” (vii).

We notice immediately that they are playing the high school blame-game again. An earlier bullet in the Preamble suggested that high schools do not see preparing pupils for postsecondary education as their responsibility. My experience suggests that this is a ridiculous assertion. But this administration has been playing this tune relentlessly and persistently for many years now. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has in effect made it *more* likely that high school teachers can not prepare students for our colleges and universities because they are, instead, focused on delivering (in lock step) a test-driven curriculum that eschews most of the higher-order, critical thinking skills that we value, and BTW, that many corporations and organizations are saying they require in their work force (see, Partnership for 21st Century Skills).

So, are high schools struggling to meet their students’ needs? Absolutely. Do they care about articulating their curricula with postsecondary institutions of all types? Again, absolutely. Is the current imposed testing regime likely to provide them and their students with the opportunities they need for this preparation and articulation? No.

But then the commission takes aim at us: “most colleges and universities don’t accept responsibility for making sure that those they admit actually succeed” (vii). You can begin to see why we can’t let others speak for English studies programs. Here we are damned if we do and damned if we don’t. If we, for instance,

- generate writing center (learning center) innovations (both face-to-face and online),
- provide a basic writing or advanced writing curriculum,
- contribute to WAC/CAC/ECAC efforts,
- argue to lower the student/teacher ratio in the first years of the college General Education curriculum,
- make a real effort to provide strong, empathetic advising in order to attend to retention issues

we are “wasting time and taxpayer’s dollars” by providing services that should be unnecessary or should have been taken up in high school. Ignore those efforts, however, and we aren’t accepting responsibility for student success.

If we are damned both ways, perhaps the object of the report is simply to

condemn higher education and our English studies work in particular.

Access to Higher Education

The commission also mentions that “the consequences [of the increasing cost of higher education] ... are most severe for students from low-income and for racial and ethnic minorities,” soon to be our workforce majority (vii).

This is the gem of the report. If higher education is failing, it is because we are part of a larger economic system that is failing the lower economic demographic of this country: more on this in a moment. So when the Commission gets to its overarching goals, there is one in particular that I like.

“We want a [higher educational] system that is accessible to all Americans, throughout their lives” (viii).

Most of the rest of their suggestions are aimed at commodifying higher education and selling it in a specific package that I find objectionable. Each recommendation is peppered, for instance, with phrases like:

Phrase	Translation
contributes to economic prosperity	student graduation as commodity
global competitiveness	student workers as capital
improving HE efficiency in order to make it more affordable	academic teaching as commodity
workplace skills	student literacies as commodity
rapidly changing economy	change agents (graduating students) as capital our research as capital

The commission reveals its hand most clearly in the last goal.

“We want postsecondary institutions to adapt to a world altered by technology, changing demographics and globalization, in which the higher-education landscape includes new providers and new paradigms, from for-profit universities to distance learning” (viii).

Before moving on, notice the very narrow range of paradigms they suggest: all the way from “for-profit universities” to “distance learning.” Where are we in that vision?

However, I should be ecstatic! Worlds altered by technology, global communication systems, distance learning—what’s not to like for someone whose self-proclaimed interests lie at the intersection of

communication pedagogies, programmatic curricula, and the social/institutional influences of digital systems. This should sound like good news. Why then do I worry so?

It's one thing to study and try to understand how personal and working literacies have been altered by technology and globalization in the last five years, but is "adapting" to these forces a *goal* of higher education? Of course we need to pay close attention to the changing literacy practices of the young and the professional. We can learn a great deal about them, our culture, and literacy in general by doing so. But is it our goal to follow those practices, acritically wherever they lead us? Of course not.

Our goal is to bring our intellectual "treasures" to each class and generation of students in ways that make those treasures meaningful and important in their work, lifestyles, avocations, families, and communities.

I find the commission's final goal entirely disturbed and disturbing. My shorthand for their objective is

to encourage new vocational for-profit university providers using distance learning systems.

And what sort of education are they envisioning? That seemed to be clarified, strangely enough, in their Cost and Affordability section. Here they point to the "inexorable increase in college costs" (2) which discourage students (and particularly low-income students) from attending. I have no problem with that concern. However, higher education is to address this concern by improving "institutional efficiency and productivity" (2) and to do that we must encourage "the spread of technology that can lower costs" (2). Again, why am I not at ease with this suggestion?

My read of this statement is that the commission is interested in the productivity gains that have occurred in industry: the efficient design and production of products, of commodities. My first question would be, isn't the primary expenditure in academic departments in support of human work? IT departments like the one I work in carry 67% of their budget in salaries and wages. Academic departments are closer to 90% S&W, right? So improved institutional efficiency and productivity in what sense? Well, if cost is the culprit, then they must be talking about increasing the number of students taught per unit faculty. Higher education, then, must become more efficient at producing its primary commodity—students who become workers—via technological adoption and adaptation.

If students are to be considered a commodity, so too will the learning

“units” the commission imagines: units of information that are easily delivered (electronically at a distance). Friere’s banking concept of education comes to mind: students are blank slates to be written on via efficient digital systems that deliver from the sage (with no stage) to an unlimited number of students. These students, according to the commission, “care little about the distinctions that sometimes preoccupy the academic establishment [us], from whether a college has for-profit or nonprofit status to whether its classes are offered online or in brick-and-mortar buildings” (viii). According to the commission, students and their families care little about whether new learners sit at home working late into the night in online environments (like the ones I recommend that teachers use) after a full day of work versus participating in demanding, intimate, face-to-face learning experiences. Of course both students and parents care.

So their bleak description of students combines with their brute-force processing notion of the information “unit” to yield a simplistic answer to an extremely complicated set of problems: Deliver the learning “unit” online to as many blank slates as possible. John Brown and Paul Duguid, in *The Social Life of Information*, provide a nice counter point to those headed in the commission’s apparent direction. Talking about enthusiasts who place most of their faith in information per se and the technology that delivers it (as the commission seems to be doing), they say

They take it on faith that more power will somehow solve the very problems that they [powerful information distribution systems] have helped to create. ... More information, better processing, improved data mining, faster connections, wider bandwidth, stronger cryptography—these are the answers. Instead of thinking hard, we are encouraged simply to ‘embrace dumb power’ (15).

The word choice of the commission suggests that they are “embracing dumb power” as well. Brown and Duguid describe how we and our students are already drowning in information “units.” More of the same won’t help. According to them we are not being asked to think hard, that is to attend to the social, economic, pedagogical periphery hovering around all learning experiences. But we need to. The commission seems to think that getting information on the web and allowing teachers to “deliver” it, without accreditation, efficiently will solve higher education’s accessibility problems. By itself, embracing dumb power doesn’t solve corporate problems, and it won’t solve the “efficiency” problems of higher education.

By the way, the commission does not seem to be interested in an increasingly more productive *faculty*. The creation of knowledge is not

where they are going. Though not uninterested, I suppose, they are focused on “our ability to sustain economic growth and social cohesiveness” (9). We are to create human and intellectual capital: workers with enough ideas, skills, and energy to continue to produce wealth. We are also responsible for making sure they are socially cohesive and play well with others. It’s remarkable how little there is in this report about the “broader social gains” (6) that a diverse higher education population provides this culture.

Transparency and Accountability

If the discussion about transparency and accountability doesn’t sound like NCLB pitched to the higher education community, then you probably weren’t able to pay close enough attention to that earlier debate/encounter. What the commission seems to be interested in is comprehensive, standardized, comparable ‘data’ or outcomes. That way parents and politicians can look on a chart and pick out the good institutions as easily as one can choose between cars these days (Spellings, *American Dream*). At the same time they can also determine whether the “national investment in higher education is paying off and how taxpayer’s dollars could be used more effectively” (Spellings, *A Test*, 13). The technical term for this, I think, is smush. They want to smush comparisons down into a one-size-fits-all data set. In the K-12 arena that translated into an educational culture of testing, standardized testing. Though he doesn’t use the technical term “smush,” a much more sophisticated and clear statement of the implications of the commission’s direction in the accountability area can be found in Brian Huot’s article, “Consistently Inconsistent: Business and the Spellings Commission Report on Higher Education,” forthcoming in *College English*.

In their recommendations the commission suggests that articulating HS and college curricula will solve part of our problem. The assumption seems to be that if secondary and postsecondary representatives get together, that that in itself will allow us to make curricular ends meet. But what we’ll find is that the testing culture of K-12 is forcing those folks to prepare students less well for English studies expectations and values. As a group, college teachers probably wouldn’t mind if, at a moment’s notice, our students could write well on topics about which they know nothing or care little. That’s certainly what the tests test. I suspect, however, that we would rather have students who are willing to engage in rhetorically nuanced, critical, and exploratory knowledge making. The caring K-12 teachers that I’ve worked with over the past 10 years are all struggling to integrate *this latter* kind of preparation into their classes. Stories indicate that it *is* a struggle, but that there is some “push back” against restrained test-constrained curricula. But this is in spite of NCLB policies, not because of them or our current national leadership.

I expect similar “transparency and accountability” measures to be asked of or imposed on HE if our government representatives don’t experience some massive “push back” from those in the field.

Financial Aid

I won’t dwell on this except to say that the commission wants to simplify, coordinate, and combine programs resulting in less confusion, fewer hidden dollars. Universities and colleges have contributed to the problem in this area by sending out apples-and-oranges cost estimates to students looking at even very similar institutions. I am in favor of the effort to simplify, but I hope that higher education advocates have high-powered statisticians and economists there to do the numbers. In this day and (war-stressed budgetary) age, I would not be surprised to see a decrease in the federal cost share. Others are also worried about this issue (see Douglas Bennett’s remarks below).

Accrediting Agencies

Those agencies are a natural target for this administration. Again, we need some players in Washington with organizational clout paying close attention to the negotiations that go on between federal and accreditation agencies. A few years ago the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) changed their language and guidelines for communicative literacies and about ½ of the top engineering programs in the nation immediately pulled their support for general education technical communication courses and moved the work “in house.” Not that these programs aren’t successful, but they struggle (as English departments do) with the workload. And they struggle to understand and incorporate the complex textual, aural, visual, and time-based media world that their students face. The point is that large institutional changes can occur that influence English studies programs directly when accreditation agencies change focus or language. The Department of Education leadership knows this. These agencies are on their immediate “to do” list.

“Follow the money” as the good old boy from my home state, Ross Perot, once said.

I could have missed something in the Recommendations section but these are the areas where the commission suggests that federal money go:

- Incentives for “interoperable outcomes-focused accountability systems” (23) (In the K-12 area, this has translated into a drive for ubiquitous testing efforts meant to feed these ‘systems.’)
- FIPSE grants for learning-related research: neuroscience, cognitive science, and organizational science (24). (Are we an organizational

science? :-)

- Federal money for STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and math) (15).
- Distance education (Sorry, there is no money here, just strategizing).

The rest we need to do ourselves in collaboration with the states and corporations. In spite of the fear mongering associated with the literacy gap that started the report, there is no direct money going into research and program development in that area.

How full is the cup we are looking at?

If we are dead set on attending to the fiscal issues of HE (commodification), perhaps we should listen to economists? Daniel Hamermesh at the University of Texas, The Edward Everett Hale Centennial Professor of Economics, submitted a report to the commission in 2005. First, let me say that I am alternately appalled and delighted by the approach and language that economists use, in so much as I can understand them. Hamermesh had his audience in mind and wrote this report right at my level, which I assume for him is a reasonably intelligent high school student. I recommend it.

Is the time and effort of a college education worth it for students?

In economic terms, the answer is "Absolutely:" more so now than in 1974 (when he did his first study). It is the equivalent over a lifetime of earning an living to a very safe savings account that returns 12% interest: an extraordinary amount. "If an investment in college has not become more risky [physically] over the past quarter century, which seems like a reasonable assumption (in the USA), we can conclude that higher education is a more worthwhile investment today than it was in the 1970s" (3).

Should Higher Education be 'general' or 'vocational' in nature?

What's Hamermesh's bottom line? "If we believe the economy will be fairly static, concentrating on more vocationally-oriented curricula makes more sense than if we believe the economy will be advancing more rapidly through technology (4)": that is, as we interact with and make use of new technologies for our own purposes. Hamermesh, by the way, does NOT vote for the static economy. What this means to me is that English studies programs need to be engaging frequently in technology-related literacy projects, but to our own ends, focused on our own goals and belief systems, and not just in service to vocational recommendations.

Will higher prices in higher education reduce demand?

The bottom line: No, not across the board. It's too good a deal, and the

“rich” know it.

Access?

But it *will* “affect access by students who come from poorer families.” Hamermesh continues, “any policy that especially reduces access to college for children from families in the bottom two-thirds of the income distribution *will exacerbate the already strong trends toward greater income inequality, both within and across generations* (my emphasis)” (7). The rich get ... while the poor

This comment seems striking and enormously important, so I’ll repeat it:

“the already strong trends toward greater income inequality, both within and across generations.”

This is particularly important because of what other economists, like Philip Trostel tell us. In a piece he prepared for the Wisconsin Center for the Advancement of Postsecondary Education titled: “The long-term economic effects of declining state support for higher education: Are states shooting themselves in the foot?”

His answer is of course, “Yes!” The states are losing opportunities. “With the effective targeting of state support to *students on the margin of college attendance*, state tax dollars have the potential to be more than self-financing in the long run. In other words, in addition to the other benefits of higher education, the production of college graduates (Here I cringe at the ‘commodity’ thing going on.) has the potential to be a very cost-effective economic development tool for states” (7).

States lose out in many ways. James Hunt (former governor of North Carolina), in “Educational Leadership for the 21st Century,” suggests that “America’s baby-boom generation, the largest and best-educated in our nation’s history, is on the verge of retirement.” He continues, “demographers tell us that new workers will come increasingly from ... minority and low-income groups that our present education system is most likely to leave behind” (2).

This is the issue that seems most important to draw from the commission’s report. Hamermesh suggests that “any restructuring of the system that would tilt more of the burden toward upper-middle and upper-income families and reduce the burden on middle- and low-income families would help mitigate the trends toward increasing earning and income inequality and intergenerational immobility” (9). According to him such restructuring would function as “an equalizer of opportunity.”

The sad thing about Spellings' commission report and the current administration's implementation of it is that while they recognizes this central concern, administration evidences the self-imposed prohibition against the development of *any* (leaving aside foreign interventions!) large-scale government program that might deal with the issue. And across the board higher education representatives have made it clear that no real change will occur without federal leadership and money (See Bennette and DiCroce below).

A final story about the Commission's report. On Sept. 1 in *Inside Higher Education* a report surfaced about how 20 days after the August 10th vote on the commission report language, there was direct corporate post-vote influence on the language of the report:

A colleague, Charlie Lowe, wrote to an email to a list interested in open source software. He said,

"At the last minute, after the language in the report had been voted on, the Microsoft representative pitched a fit and [worked hard to have] all mention of open source removed from the a key paragraph in the draft."

Apparently that representative wasn't entirely successful (see page 25 of the report), but the fact that any language changes could be forced on the Commission at that late date is somewhat indicative of the corporate, commercial, and commodifying influences on this document. The language of the report is, of course, "capital" as well. It has the potential to generate a lot of money for Microsoft going forward.

What do others say about this "dog's breakfast of a report" (Bennett)?

Frank H.T. Rhodes is president emeritus of Cornell University suggests that "if states can no longer provide the resources to maintain the quality of their public research universities (University of Michigan, gets 7%; UCLA, 15%; University of Colorado at Boulder, 8%), ... [states need to] give those institutions the freedom to manage their own affairs:

- appointments to governing boards,
- greater flexibility in the management of resources,
- determine their own enrollment levels, tuition charges, student mix, and financial aid" (B9)

I see this as a reasonable response to reduced support by states but also as a persistent and relentless movement away from land-grant ideals and values. My question is then, are those values really irretrievable in this country?

Lee S. Shulman is president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

"We [US workers] remain competitive through a multiplicity of institutions that prepare today's students for success in tomorrow's economic marketplace by sustaining many different approaches to higher education and its evaluation - rather than by converging on the 'one best system.' The genius of American education lies in approaches to learning that encourage curiosity, discovery, intellectual risk taking, and the freedom to make mistakes in the search for new ideas and forms of expression" (B9).

In other words, it may be difficult to choose between "a multiplicity of institutions," but that diversity is justified and remains the strength of our system of higher education. The one-size model that the Commission hints at does not support this vision of higher education.

Douglas C. Bennett is the president of Earlham College.

"The single most important issue facing higher education today is the problem of access: Not enough Americans are completing a college education - often for financial reasons. Thus, the best recommendation in the dog's breakfast of a report from the Spellings commission is a call for 'a significant increase in need-based financial aid.'"

Still quoting,

"But the commission is fairly mute about where the money will come from except that they feel like 'restructuring' federal financial-aid programs. That could mean no net new money. ... This is a commission report that wants to improve higher education on the cheap" (B7).

Deborah M. DiCroce is president of Tidewater Community College (one of the largest in the nation).

"The commission did not sufficiently recognize the role that community colleges play as the 'on ramp' to higher education for millions of Americans Equally glaring is the report's failure to mention our heavy reliance on state and local support" which have been reduced systematically over the past decade and are not likely to systematically increased in the near future" (B7).

Where do we go from here?

According to Coombes, it is the rare academic who can claim to be outside the commodifying regime of our culture. Surely the national

policy making of the current administration and those who are likely to follow, make it clear that all academics need to be paying attention to the economic conditions that form and reform our working conditions.

In particular, those of us who work in the Computers and Writing community are particularly complicit and need to attend even more closely to economics and working conditions. After all we have always been in the business of "re-engineering the educational experience." Paul LeBlanc suggests that our work as technology/pedagogy specialists has even reversed some considerations from 10 years ago. At that point (and in many new DE programs today) we were asking, "How can we make the online classroom as good an experience as the f2f classroom?" We now ask, "How can we take from the best designed online classes those practices that will improve f2f teaching and learning" (personal communication, December 26 2006)? Our work can and will be used, for better or for worse, to change the very institutions which support and provide space for our work.

Will we inadvertently be helping to generate what my Ohio colleague, Bruce Ardinger, suggests are future workplace conditions? "It's clear that the English professor's career of 40 years ago is not the one today's graduate students are entering."

He imagines some likely extrapolations to 2046, 40 years hence:

"A. Teaching-Faculty Roles:

- Multiple-institution contracts
- Multiple-location responsibilities
- Multiple-format responsibilities (classroom, videoconference, Web, virtual)
- Redefinition [of professor/teacher] as facilitators (or script writers) to assist in delivering pre-set curricula
- Redefinition as curriculum designers and assemblers of packaged programs
- Value of academic specialty defined [only] by relevance to student's major
- Quality of teaching determined [only] by ability to tie specialty to student's major
- Web and other media developers will be seen as equal academic specialties

B. Institutional Reorganization: For-profit companies purchasing colleges for their accreditation

- Neumont University grew from Morrison College and was cited in the Spellings Report as an example that other colleges should model
- Barat College <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v52/i46/46a00101.htm>,

- grew into the American College of Education
- Grand Canyon University in Phoenix was purchased by an investment group" (6).

We can see many of these trends are already developing. But is that the kind of workplace scenario we want to encourage? What can we do to discourage the debilitating components and encourage the ones we think are important?

Another good colleague, Kathy Yancey, summarized in an email some of her MLA panel remarks on the defunding of higher education. Are they predictive as well? She suggested that "the Spellings Commission endorsed a labor model that is another kind of defunding [of higher education, other than reduced state monies]: they are quite enthusiastic about a just-in-time community college model of adjunct outsourced labor that won't cost them the salaries of you, of John [Schilb], or yours truly. From this vantage point, we look like part of the problem" (personal communication, January 3 2007).

Our work in Computers and Writing is making this model of organization easier to imagine and implement. We are complicit in the commodification of higher education, largely as a result of unintended consequences: unintended uses of our work. We can't control that. We can and must speak out however about our intended goals for the work we do.

So make no mistake about it, though there is some "danger" associated with the Spellings report itself in the hands of the current administration, the real concerns cross party lines. In what follows, I hope to address these real concerns and answer, in my own way, some of the questions I left hanging in the previous section.

Our Reactions

So far our culture has been willing to allow large corporations to push our intellectual property laws to include "more and more intangible interests as forms of property" (Coombes, 54): in this case, all the products and meaning making of the university as well as the higher education experience itself. This willingness, unfortunately, fits well with the commission's efforts to bring these commodified units (instructional units, worker units, even the social and intellectual experience units) under the control of for-profit and efficient institutions, institutions that can be compared as easily as the make and models of cars these days. Margaret Spellings said as much when she visited OSU this fall: "The same transparency and ease [as car selection] should be the case when students and their parents shop for colleges." (Spellings, American Dream).

We face an intimidating set of cultural forces:

- capital formations influencing all aspects of HE with an IP legal system in support of that movement.
- work practices that emphasize contingency and the unit commodification of content

What then do we do about it? Not just what will we do about the report but the steady assault on higher education?

1. Pay attention and get someone to attend those boring, meaningful meetings in the Washington DC area. NCTE is one of the few, if not the only, national organization that represents related content teachers from pre-kindergarten through college. They have for the past three years been establishing an office in DC with this object in mind: to be at the meetings that matter nationally and speak out using research-based findings and exceptional teaching practices from which Washington insiders can learn. I am proud of the work that this organization is trying to do in difficult times. They need folks in English Studies to join; pay dues, lead, and suggest that others do the same. Watch for their timely blog posts as well.

To see, for instance, a summary of the process and results of building a legislative platform for NCTE constituents, look at Kent Williamson's April 5, 2006 NCTE blog post: <http://ncteblog.blogspot.com/2006/04/ncte-legislative-platform.html#links>.)

Or better yet sign up for their Action Alerts!

<http://www.ncte.org/about/gov/cgrams/news/124717.htm>

2. Collect our best efforts and report them to a national audience. We, and I mean English studies programs across the board, have been and are doing terrific and important work. We need to speak persistently, relentlessly about that work to the broader publics. The general public can't imagine the implications of IP or national educational policies on our work and teaching, because they don't know what we do! NCTE has a body called the College Forum where most of the major players in English Studies are represented: Two-Year College Association, English Education, Literature, Rhetoric, Composition, Professional Communication. My current job on that forum is to talk with colleagues and gather successful practices for alignment, for technology integration, for recruitment of low SES students, for retention or for any other attribute of English studies or university experience that we think is essential for students, communities, or the nation.

What practices can you describe that I might take back to this committee as they help NCTE engage in national educational policy debates?

3. Most importantly, we need to persistently and relentlessly define our treasures.

If, as Coombe suggests, we aren't likely to avoid the commodification of our students, our institutions, our work, and even our thoughts, then let's at least reframe the language around them in ways that are not entirely economic in nature. Past President of NCTE and one of the College Forum members, Patti Stock, said it well:

"We need to stick to invigorating the discussion of the things we care about and believe to be important. I'm ... thinking here about George Lakoff's, <Don't Think of an Elephant> observation that when the opposite side responds to the NCLB questions from reporters, it is always speaking about NCLB. Let's stop doing that. Let's get the conversation on our grounds. Let's talk in our terms" (Stock).

And let's talk in our own terms about our own treasures! But what are our intellectual and pedagogical treasures? It is at this point that Rosemary Coombe's counterpublic methodologies might come in handy:

- "ironic appreciation,
- complicitous critique,
- affectionate annoyance,
- sympathetic intervention, and
- grudgingly respectful grievances" (271).

If the earlier part of this article might be called complicitous critique, what follows might be a sympathetic intervention into the Spellings report dialogue. I simply began by wondering what intellectual or pedagogical treasures I might suggest we make public as someone coming out of technology studies, composition, and professional communication:

Treasures:

- Small classes and the intimate, literate intellectual interaction that goes on between teacher and student
- An administrative commitment to support daily individual literacy practices (as in writing centers)
- A commitment to the actual student literacy needs that they bring into our institutions (as addressed in basic and advanced writing programs)
- Connections with an ancient rhetorical and literary history
- A critical eye toward new media events and systems by engaging in the process of both "making" and "analyzing" media events and systems

- The ability to use several semiotic systems (oral, aural, textual, visual, time-based, etc.) to solve problems and inspire people
- Access to the intellectual history, power, and beauty of many cultures
- Access to the rhetorical intricacies of all human communication

What are your treasures? Write them down. Share them with me, your colleagues, your community, and the NCTE staff who are talking with senators and representatives on a regular basis (Paul Bodmer <PBodmer@NCTE.ORG> and Kent Williamson <kwilliamson@NCTE.ORG>).

But how do we get our treasures out to the public? I'm thinking here of real publics (not just government agents): those voting on politicians who, in the near future, will be making policy and making that policy work (or not work).

4. Let's change the higher educational culture, slightly, to encourage the persistent, relentless production of a public discourse about our intellectual and pedagogical treasures. I have a limited imagination but here is one way that I can imagine doing this difficult work and distributing the responsibility for accomplishing it to all who publish in our journals and speak at our conferences.

Pressure or convince every journal editor to require authors to summarize the importance of their work in no more than a few paragraphs and in language suitable for newspaper articles and other types of public distribution systems. In addition, make it an acceptable form of 'service' for faculty and staff to collect appropriate materials from their journals and provide relevant copy to local papers and the growing number of other media venues intended for the general public, like blogs and wikis. Let's convince conference planners to publish a selected set of summaries from the hundreds of sessions each year.

I'm imagining a steady barrage of online and hardcopy representations of our English studies treasures nation wide based on the research, conference presentations, publishing, and service work we are already doing.

There is plenty of relentless and persistent work to do. Perhaps we should all take part in it.

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