A FAUSTIAN BARGAIN

Portals have been much in the news of late. Probably like many of you, we have tried to understand the phenomenon and assess its importance for the future of teaching and learning.

Portals are certainly not a new phenomenon—America On Line, for instance, has been around for a very long time in Internet terms. Yahoo, Alta Vista, and other search engine portals have similarly been with us for some time. The past few years have seen the emergence of all sorts of targeted portals—for book purchasers with Amazon.com, golfers, scuba divers. Name your own affinity group and you can find at least a couple of portals out there. Predictably, the phenomenon has moved from broadcast to narrowcast as advertising has become one of the mainstays of the portal companies.

Recently we have seen the rise of portals directed toward college students.

For the most part these new portals offer a set of services to students that have been on the planning horizon for institutional technology officers. The ability for students to be able to check class schedules, purchase textbooks, look at their unofficial transcripts and check their remaining graduation requirements, to push meeting notices to students, and to do it all on line is only a logical extension of the wired campus. There is, of course, one obvious catch in having these services provisioned commercially—advertising.

One of our former institutional presidents recently used the back page of the Chronicle of Higher Education to bemoan the advertising component and warn against the damage it will do to the "higher" goals of higher education. He acknowledged the extent to which the higher education enterprise has already sold its soul to advertisers of soft drinks, athletic gear, and the like. But what the heck, students are already bombarded with advertising in the student newspaper, on the student radio station, every time they log on to Yahoo, and in a thousand other instances of every day of their lives.

It seems to me that the real Faustian bargain with commercial portal companies is not advertising, however bad you may think that is in the higher education context. The explicit choice of a commercial portal company is the implicit choice of a new partner in your educational venture. While advertising may appear to be potentially lucrative at the moment, the long term value of the partnership for the commercial portal company will be the ability to track the demographics of student behavior. The data mining potential is extraordinary.

If, as we suspect, former students will want to avail themselves of a continuous set of mid-career learning opportunities, who will provide them? The higher education establishment may think that they naturally will. Their new partners may have a totally different idea as to whom that marketspace will belong to. These new partners will certainly have a wealth of information—heretofore inaccessible to them—to make choices about which post-baccalaureate learning experiences they want to offer. Data mining offers the potential to determine just how poorly students do in, say introductory math courses, and establish a business opportunity to target that student group with offers for outside-the-classroom, outside-the institution remedial work. Such efforts, artfully constructed, need not run afoul of student privacy regulations. One could expand this list endlessly for the learning opportunities that our traditional institutions may be slow to initiate.

Mining student demographics on the non-academic side may be even more lucrative. Not only can their book-buying habits be shifted from the college bookstore to online providers, but so can hundreds of other purchasing choice be shifted to online providers who offer both convenience and speedy delivery.

Now, is all this bad? It would seem to depend upon your point of view. For our historic institutions of higher education, this may not be the camel's nose under the tent. This may be opening the door to the whole herd. From the standpoint of the student, it may offer the potential for all sorts of new and valuable learning opportunities—albeit some carrying the additional baggage of advertisements. At any rate, it is simply one more sign of the transition of higher education from a public monopoly to a more competitive, entrepreneurial driven system.

—RCH
MR. JEFFERSON, WHAT DO YOU THINK?

The other day I picked up a local newspaper and was surprised to see a candidate for the General Assembly of Virginia suggesting that it might be time to consider privatizing some or all of the state's colleges and universities and using tax credits or tuition vouchers as the state vehicle to fund and encourage higher education.

Well, you can imagine the consternation of the public higher education community. Even the reporter couldn't help editorializing in the front page article. You can also imagine the editorial appearing on the next day's editorial page. All this in Mr. Jefferson's Commonwealth.

The candidate was bemoaning the bureaucracy and political gamesmanship that goes on at budget time. His response was to have the money follow the student. Subsidize the consumer rather than the provider. Never mind that even Washington has discovered that funding the recipient rather than the provider works a lot better —our poor political aspirant had done the candidate equivalent of passing gas in church.

I wonder what Mr. Jefferson would think? After all, it was he who hailed The establishment of the University of Virginia as his penultimate achievement —even more important than his service as President of the United States. It was Jefferson, the Virginian, who has provided us with so many memorable quotes about the value of education and the necessity for governments to support education.

The paper's editorial was cutely titled "Let's not 'privatize' the old college try." The editorial writer said, "There are those ideas that are rejected out of hand because they are so utterly nonsensical that, for good reason, they are not to be taken seriously." I searched in vain for the "good reason" through the rest of the editorial. Students might use the tax credit or voucher to attend "an all-girls college" or maybe even pick a proprietary school. They might choose to go to a seminary or another religious affiliated school. I looked in vain for some reason other than that the candidate had chosen to "home school" his children but didn't find one. Of course, the paper was all for taking the politics and bureaucracy out of public higher education.

It never ceases to amaze that those who most strongly profess their openness to new ideas are incapable of imagining any future that is more than just a minor perturbation of the status quo. Too many of our leaders suffer the same syndrome as ascribed to the corporate executive—their focus is no farther than the next quarterly report.

What exactly is the role of state government in supporting higher education? Must they "operate" institutions of higher education or is their imperative to see that post-secondary educational experiences are available and that citizens are encouraged to take advantage of them through governmental support. The latter doesn't presuppose the former, the voice of our editorial writer to the contrary notwithstanding.

What would Mr. Jefferson think? I suspect he would think that our unhappy candidate has an idea worth considering.

—RCH

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LECTURES ARE NOT CHEAP! (CORRECTION)

In the last issue of The Learning MarketSpace, we reported that a redesign of a lecture-based statistics course would result in an annual savings of $51,000. We were in error—$51,000 is the semester savings. The annual savings is $116,600.

—CAT

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THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Several weeks ago I spent a couple of hours with a reporter for one of our prestigious national magazines who was doing a story on the "Digital Divide"—a very catchy title. "What," she asked, "is your view of the digital divide?" I'm sure my response was far from what she expected. I asked her to explain the digital divide to me and she replied something like, "you know—the haves and have nots."

Now this is not an unimportant question for those who are contemplating moving some forms of instruction from the physical classroom to the ether of distance learning. If students don't have the technology to take advantage of technology mediated learning environments, we won't have any students. If some do and some don't, we are immediately limited in those we can reach. So what about this digital divide?

Certainly slaves in Egypt in 1000 BC had little expectation that they, their children, or their children's children would be anything but slaves. Similarly, a serf in 13th century France had no expectation that he would ever be a landowner, much less lord of the manor. A social divide pertained in each instance that was essentially impregnable. The "cost" to go from slave or serf to land owner was simply beyond reach.

The College Board recently published some statistics that might give us pause. Three quarters of households with incomes greater than $75,000 have computers. One third of households with incomes between $25,000 and $35,000 have computers. Only one sixth of households with incomes less than $15,000 have computers.
Interestingly enough, (admitting that I don't have the exact figures), better than 95 percent of those households with incomes less than $15,000 have television sets.

The "cost" to go from a television "have not" to a television "have" is in the range of $200 to $500. The cost to go from a computer "have not" to a computer "have" is about $600. To be sure, Internet connectivity can raise that price somewhat—but not appreciably if we are willing to settle for 56 kbps dial-up. It is also the case that over 95 percent of the households in the United States have a telephone. Unlike the cases of the Egyptian slave or the French serf, there is a very real prospect that one can go from a computer "have not" to a computer "have." In fact, if consumers valued computers as much as televisions, we wouldn't have a digital divide to talk about.

So how should the "digital divide" figure in our planning as we think about moving from the marketplace to the marketspace? Probably not at all. The $600 cost to become a "have" is about what one might expect to save in first semester tuition costs—not to mention room and board. We might better be talking about the "Digital Dividend."

The digital divide we should be worrying about is the unhappily slow roll-out and high cost of high speed digital connectivity. To produce really compelling learning applications on line, we will most often require megabit access. At the current roll-out rate of our phone companies' digital subscriber line technology and the cable companies' symmetrical broadband services, we will be severely limited in what we can design in the way of new learning environments for quite some time to come. Maybe we should get to work on this digital divide.

—RCH

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UPCOMING LEADERSHIP FORUM EVENTS

The Learning Marketplace: New Resources for Teaching and Learning
November 11, 1999
Atlanta, Georgia
Moderators: Bob Heterick and Carol Twigg

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