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The Communication Department in a State of Perpetual Crisis: Discount Store University?

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In recent years, calls have escalated for greater accountability from institutions of higher education. These calls have often been accompanied by Draconian cuts in higher education budgets, revenue-based budgeting, and sometimes by imposition of quantifiable objectives. As a consequence of this movement, Departments of Communication - and indeed most Liberal Arts disciplines - have been forced to reappraise their curriculum and the way they balance teaching with other responsibilities. Painful as this process is, it can provide an opportunity for building stronger, more vigorous communication programs.

Whenever a new policy for boosting enrollment or measuring student outcomes is announced, a frequently-heard response is a groan accompanied by a phrase such as “K-Mart U!” (Substitute the name of your own local discount chain.) This comment seems to be intended as a sarcastic protest of the crassness of the administration, state legislature, or whomever else is blamed for the situation. “K-Mart,” or whatever other discount chain comes readily to mind, provides a handy, powerful, and well-understood metaphor for everything that seems to be going wrong in higher education—and, perhaps, in society generally. But the metaphor is multi-sided; it can also furnish a metaphor for the opportunities and challenges of the current situation.

Although education is profoundly different from either manufacturing or retailing, the economic model is more than just a metaphor. On the one hand, as Linder (1970) pointed out, the economic model emphatically applies to time: The time and energy of students as well as faculty are scarce resources. On the other hand, even in state systems that have historically tried to hold down tuition charges, budgets have been implicitly affected by the number of students served. However reluctantly we face up to it, the need to justify the way we allocate scarce resources can and should stimulate greater clarity of thought and purpose—if only in the sense of Dr. Johnson’s comment that “when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.” In this essay, I begin by exploring the implications of the “discount store” metaphor as it is commonly used and

understood. I then turn to the other side of the metaphor, and consider its implications for how academic departments are led and administered.

THE SITUATION

“Urban University” is located near the center of a large urbanized area, and the campus is fully integrated into the urban landscape. Most of its students commute and most hold at least part time jobs; many have child-care responsibilities. College is *not* the center of their lives. It is one of many claims on their time and attention, and rarely do they see it as the most urgent or assign it the highest priority. The typical student is 30 years old, from a working-class background, and a first-generation college attendee. Most students at Urban University combine a passionate intellectual curiosity with a very pragmatic emphasis on preparation for a career—but the balance between these motivations varies widely from student to student.

Urban University has been hit hard by a decade of budgetary constraints, stagnating faculty salaries, and lost tenure lines. The Communication Department has lost more than its share of tenure lines, and has been forced to fill in with underpaid adjunct lecturers. Faculty members have tended to regard these attacks as motivated by anti-intellectualism—which may well have played a role. However, even friends of higher education have been frustrated by the perceived reluctance of faculty, in the face of changing realities, to re-think the way we do our work, to re-examine our fundamental assumptions, and to seek more effective and less costly ways of operating.

During the same decade, the economic base of the entire region has shifted from a resource basis to a high-tech basis, with many of the new high-tech businesses located in suburbs. New money is beginning to flow into the educational system, but it is attached to a budgeting philosophy explicitly intended to foster an “entrepreneurial” spirit of innovation and competition, with university budgets directly based on enrollments. Departments and programs are coming under increased pressure to justify their budgets in terms of student enrollments, to increase class sizes and teaching loads, and to develop objective measures of student achievement. Presumably, “productivity” will continue to include scholarship and service, but concepts drawn from cost accounting and marketing have already entered the lexicon.

At the same time, partly in response to increasing tuition costs, students are placing increasing emphasis on preparation for a career. Surveys of communication students, recent graduates, and the organizations that employ them, as well as other academic programs that require or recommend communication courses, repeatedly confirm an overwhelming preference for “skills” courses such as public speaking, listening, group communication, and intercultural communication. Theory courses lose out across the board. The preference for application and skills over theory is only slightly less evident among master’s students: Even the most theoretically-oriented say they would prefer to get both theory and skills.

“K-MART U”?

What is entailed when a faculty member uses a discount store chain as a metaphor for university policies? Either students are “products” (presumably with interchangeable parts) or they are “customers”—with the right to choose for themselves what they will learn, how they will learn it, and perhaps even what grade they will be assigned. A clear implication is that university administration, in emphasizing the need to increase class sizes and reduce the number of small-enrollment classes such as seminars, is undermining the quality of students’ educational experience. The growth of for-profit institutions such as the University of Phoenix renders the commercial metaphor even more salient.

Since the time of Plato, educators have been uneasy with the idea that knowledge should be evaluated according to its utility, and that education is a process of merely training students to produce economic goods (Proctor, 1991). We prefer to emphasize liberal values such as reflection, logical rigor, and mastery of arcane bodies of knowledge defined in terms of facts, connections among facts, and methods for discovering new facts and connections. Above all we emphasize mastery of and competent participation in continuing, centuries-long conversations about truth, meaning, and beauty. When knowledge and education are conceived in such terms, we assert, any attempt to measure quality or productivity is ill-conceived and naïve.

The discount store metaphor calls to mind this continuing dispute over the nature of knowledge and of education, and it signifies a certain position in that dispute. By implying that a particular proposal will define the university as comparable to discount stores, with values and procedures modeled on discount stores, we implicitly contrast the “discount store mentality” of the legislature, trustees, or university administration with the preferred and cherished ideal of liberal education. By applying a discount store label to any proposal that originates in a preoccupation with fiscal concerns, we signal our opposition to this particular proposal and our disdain for the idea that financial considerations might play any important role in academic decisions.

“K-Mart University” expresses and summarizes faculty frustrations about the perceived disparity between the liberal ideals fundamental to the university and the budgetary realities so insistently expressed by administrators—and often, in a different form, by students. The metaphor evokes images of consumerist values and heavy-handed marketing, of shelves crammed with gadgets and low-quality toys. The metaphor evokes a world in which faculty decisions about curriculum, course content, and pedagogy, as well as student decisions about major and course schedules, are based on material considerations of price and utility rather than intellectual, aesthetic, or cultural values. Calls for expanded access through courses offered in suburban branches, in late hours, and on weekends seem to echo the discounter’s boast of service “24 hours a day, 365 days a year.” In an era of computerized online shopping, inventory, and check-out systems the discount store metaphor captures our uneasiness about calls for expanded use of technology and administrators’ naïve importation of concepts such as “productivity” and “quality circles” from the world of manufacturing.

CONTRADICTIONS WITHIN THE COMMUNICATION DISCIPLINE

This general discomfort is underscored by contradictions within our own discipline. Communication originated as a distinct discipline in the twentieth century when English departments spun off their applied writing courses into new departments of Journalism and their public speaking courses into new departments of Speech (Delia, 1987). The original divestiture of the applied communication programs was motivated by institutional politics: “Applied” subjects were widely regarded with disdain and intellectual respectability was associated exclusively with original research or scholarship and publication in scholarly journals, not with teaching. Quite naturally, the newly formed departments, along with their faculty members, also yearned for intellectual respectability—and for the resources that follow intellectual respectability. Thus, even within departments originally formed to provide education in communication skills, the imperative was toward research and scholarship based on increasingly sophisticated and abstract theories. This institutional imperative was reinforced by genuine interest in deepening our understanding of communication, and a desire to place our instruction on a firmer intellectual base. Unfortunately, we often seem to lose sight of our mission to understand *and improve* human communication. Indeed, theorists and researchers sometimes explicitly disclaim any intention to prescribe

behavior—on any grounds, including those of effectiveness (see, for example, Fitzpatrick, 1988).

The preference for scholarship over teaching and for theory development over more applied research is itself grounded in the tension between two different concepts of knowledge (skills v. understanding) and the related tension between two different concepts of teaching (training v. education). Grounded in Rhetoric, one of the original seven liberal arts, communication is inexorably drawn toward the more classical and philosophical approaches to knowledge. In many communication departments, skills training (public speaking, listening, etc.) is largely relegated to graduate assistants and fixed-term instructors, or transformed by emphasizing theory and de-emphasizing practice. For example, depending on who is teaching it, a persuasion course may emphasize rhetorical theory, social psychological theory, or social criticism. Students in the course rarely create persuasive messages or engage in persuasive discourse. It is often left for the students to figure out how to apply the theories they learn and critique.

Counter to the market-based pressures for more skills training are the values long associated with liberal arts. Liberal habits of mind, including the habits of critical and reflective thinking as well as the habits of life-long learning, provide an important basis for citizenship, effective participation in community life, and in general leading the fuller, richer life associated with being a well-rounded, urbane, *educated* person. In the long run, even the students' economic interests are better served by a liberal education. The technically trained may have an easier time finding an entry-level job - but the liberally educated have a much better chance of climbing the management ladder. However, to get on the ladder in the first place, to get that first job, graduates need evident *skills* as well as a set of attitudes and expectations suited to the workplace. Similarly, the liberally educated also have a much better chance of living meaningful and socially responsible lives, but to do so, they need meaningful and rewarding employment. Again, that means appropriate skills, attitudes, and expectations. Our students sometimes seem to understand these facts of life much better than we!

It is difficult to conceive of a truly well-educated person who is not a skilled communicator - or rather, it is difficult to conceive of someone who is not a skilled communicator as truly well-educated. It may be that the perceived tension between skills and liberal arts education is the result of an inadequate view of what really constitutes "skillful" communication - and of a misconception of the relationships linking theory, liberal education, and career success. The highly skilled speakers, listeners, group leaders, intercultural communicators, and persuaders whom we admire are neither shallow technicians nor complex "ivory tower" theoreticians. It is a mistake to separate skills from theory, to assign priority to either theory or skills, or to wait for theories that fully explain skillful communication. Regardless of whether skillful communication is an art or a craft or whether we have the ability someday to make it a true science, it is something we know how to teach. Skillful communication certainly merits a central place in the *liberal arts*.

We have long been allowed - even encouraged (by the publication "numbers game") to separate the "useful" from the "interesting" and to pursue esoteric topics in our scholarship and in our teaching. In part this reflects a misplaced sense of disciplinary courtesy, an assumption that membership in a discipline is requisite to understanding - and certainly to evaluating - the discourse and practices of that community. The consequences have not been healthy. Liberated from the *necessity* of explaining our work to outsiders we have in many cases lost the *ability* to connect our work to ordinary human activities.

If we wish to claim a place at the table by virtue of any special expertise in teaching skillful communication to our students, we must begin by ceasing to denigrate communication skills *within* our own discipline. We also need to be clear about the relationship between what we profess and the lives of our students.

K-MART U REVISITED

At Urban University, half the students have child-care responsibilities and work full-time – sometimes at more than one job. Most of them shop at discount stores. Indeed, many of the *professors* at Urban University frequent discount stores. So what does it say about us when we disparagingly compare our university to the stores where we all – students and faculty alike – shop?

Faculty members, by selection if not by definition, constitute an intellectual elite. Many of the faculty members at Urban University come from working-class backgrounds, and many were among the first in their families to graduate from college. However, many completed their undergraduate degrees on scholarships at elite colleges (“Boutique College”), and most completed their graduate degrees at elite universities. Even when we attended blue-collar universities, most academicians adopted values and attitudes toward our classes and toward the educational process that set us apart from the majority of our classmates. We learned, often well before entering college, to value education “for its own sake,” to read and discuss difficult and often arcane materials and ideas with evident relish. For those of us who come from working class families, our devotion to the ideals of classical education was fortified by the need to defend these values against skeptical family members and neighbors. We took ideas seriously and discussed them, often argued over them, passionately. We read Plato diligently, and nodded with approval when he recommended the separation of the world of ideas from the pragmatic “world of slaves and women,” of mechanics and merchants.

Implicitly, when we invoke the discount store metaphor, we are comparing our universities – or what we are afraid our universities will become – with the elite colleges we admire and with the elite universities where we earned our graduate degrees. If any of our students choose to attend our university for the same reasons that bring them to shop at a discount store, the “K-Mart U” metaphor invidiously contrasts their (materialistic) educational motives and ambitions with our own (nobler) educational motives and ambitions. More to the point, it contrasts the material aspirations of the lower middle class with the spiritual – and social – aspirations of the upper middle class.

One obvious alternative to the discount store metaphor is the up-scale boutique, the exclusive store where quality and style are everything, where “If you have to ask the price you can’t afford it.” In contrast to the discount store, these stores emphasize style, personalized service, the highest achievable quality without concern for price. Often, they also offer a certain snobbishness, the opportunity to spend a few hours in a luxurious environment we can’t really afford.

Why do many of our students shop at discount stores? Why do *we* shop at discount stores? One reason, certainly, is the crassly materialistic consideration of price. But other reasons may be even more important: Convenience, accessibility, goods and services of consistent and reliable quality, even if they aren’t necessarily stylish. Juggling work, family, and school, our students lead busy lives – as do we. We don’t have time for “shopping as entertainment.” We just want to buy what we need and get on with it. And perhaps, the very fact that the discount store presents itself as casual and blue-collar makes it a more comfortable place to shop – we can and do go there in jeans and sneakers, and think nothing of it.

IMPLICATIONS: PLANNING AND MANAGING THE COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

What would “K-Mart U” look like? “K-Mart U” would deliver what our students tell us they need, with few frills. It would emphasize a predictable level of quality and conve-

nience, and de-emphasize “education as entertainment.” It would recognize that few of our students are as dedicated to the life of the intellect as we – and it would honor their choices. Course requirements and assignments within each course would be designed to assure maximum return for students’ time and energy – and their rationale would be clearly explained. A casual, workaday presentation would assure that “K-Mart U” is experienced as a pleasant place to study – and to teach.

Would taking the “K-Mart U” metaphor seriously force us to eliminate “unprofitable” lines of inquiry and teaching? Would “academic freedom” and even “intellectual curiosity” come to be seen as “luxury goods,” a drag on the “bottom line” – and curtailed? This could happen, but there are at least three reasons why it need not.

First, the need to focus one’s scholarly inquiries on a relatively narrowly-defined topic does not imply either a need or a warrant to focus one’s teaching at a similarly narrow level, or even to teach in the same topic area. To the contrary, the need to teach courses directed toward a broader audience and covering a broader range of topics can help the scholar maintain a sense of connectedness between her narrower research interests and the broader concerns of the discipline. The choices—between a broad audience and narrowly focused research interests, between applications of knowledge and purely theoretical inquiry – are often expressed in Manchaean terms. On the one hand looms a hard-nosed “green eyeshade” approach, denying any place to scholarly pursuits or academic courses that cannot be justified “by the numbers.” Opposed is the classical “ivory tower” approach, claiming the moral high ground in defense of Platonic ideals of education and attacking any mention of economic viability as “philistine.” But such a dichotomy between the practical and the interesting is groundless, and leads to an intellectual dead-end – as well as to political and financial dependency.

Second, the indulgence that allows professors, as “public intellectuals,” to pursue our curiosities and interests, wherever they may lead, is essential to a vigorous culture (and to a healthy economy). It is even more essential to a vigorous university. It is up to us to use our considerable rhetorical skills to keep these facts in front of administrators and policy makers. If we truly believe in the ultimate value of what we profess, then we should be able to face with confidence the prospect of defending it in a more open “marketplace.”

Third, and perhaps most important, there is a fundamental difference between discount stores—and other manufacturing and retail enterprises—and universities. The community impact of for-profit enterprises is of secondary importance, of interest primarily to their public relations departments. As cultural institutions, universities are primarily about their impact on the community. The pejorative use of the “Discount University” metaphor is partly rooted in distress over being called to account for the way we use scarce resources, but it also reflects our distress over the way public officials seem to lose sight of this crucial distinction. Again, if we truly believe what we profess about the importance of our work to the society and the culture, we can and should engage in open debate about the structure and even the content of the university with little fear that underlying intellectual values will be forfeit.

The market metaphor is limited, but it can be useful in directing our attention to the tradeoffs we have always made – and to the possibilities for innovation and renewal. At Urban University, the new enrollment-based budget has brought to the surface the fact that smaller enrollments *here* must either be covered by larger enrollments *there*, or by other sources of revenue. *This has always been the case.* What is different about the new model is that what was previously hidden and easy to deny is now in the open. The enrollment-based budget model has provided an objective language for debating these tradeoffs. Interestingly (and perhaps ironically) it has also provided a basis for debating the less quantifiable values (such as the quality of the student experience and the place of curiosity and intellectual exploration in the classroom). Explicit recognition of the quantitative issues involved

in budgeting (enrollments, salaries, and incidental costs) have forced us to unbundle such qualitative issues as instructors' and students' habits and stylistic preferences, pedagogical concerns, perceived freedom of inquiry, and even pure physical comfort. Each of these calls for distinct solutions, distinct justifications, and unique tradeoffs.

If we believe what we profess—that facts and reason provide a better basis for decisions than myths and unreason—then we can only welcome a metaphor (and a budget model) that brings facts to light and makes it easier to calculate the relationships among facts.

However we feel about business or industry as a metaphor for education, we must acknowledge the realities of the budget as a source of intellectual discipline, alongside oral exams, dissertation defenses, and peer review. We will almost certainly find it threatening – but I believe we will also find it intellectually invigorating – to think through the pragmatic implications of our teaching, scholarship, and research at the same time as we think through their disciplinary and intellectual implications. We may find it demeaning—but we will also find it enlightening—to approach decisions about curriculum, course content, and scholarly activities in full realization that our students' time as well as our own is finite. Recognizing the limits to our resources will force us to set priorities, and will focus our attention on the value and the necessity of innovation, of inventing new ways to accomplish more with equal or less effort. It will spur us to reconcile our students' short-term career interests with their long-term educational needs and to shore up the intellectual grounding of our discipline by re-affirming the unity of theory and *praxis*.

SUMMARY: IN PRAISE OF METAPHORIC ECLECTICISM

The metaphor of the discount store is often offered as an implicit criticism of the legislators, trustees, and administrators who demand that we justify our curriculum and our methods in financial terms, that we share the responsibility for choosing what *not* to include as well as what to include. It is also sometimes offered as an implicit criticism of the students (and parents) who ask about the relevance or usefulness of course content, choose courses and majors with an eye to career and earning potential, complain about the high cost of tuition and books, and demand that courses be scheduled around work and family obligations. And certainly there is something quite obnoxious about a student who opens an advising meeting with the comment, "I'm paying for this!"

On the other hand, the "Discount Store" metaphor provides a useful reminder that our students' priorities and commitments are not and need not be identical to ours, that the teacher-student relationship is and should be reciprocal, and above all that the bills must be paid. It can help focus our thinking on the question of what is central to the "product" we offer and what is marginal. It can force us to articulate, in simple language, the value we add to our students' lives, what it is about our major and about our courses that is worth their time and their money. The metaphor can provide a partial counter to the natural human tendency of each faculty member, whenever curricular reform is discussed, to seek job security through rote assertions that his or her own specialty is central and indispensable.

Like any metaphor, the "discount store" metaphor can easily be carried too far. It would be a tragedy if we allowed ourselves to "rationalize" our curriculum to the point that it has no room for the esoteric, the abstract, the whimsical, or—frankly—the trivial. Market metaphors should never be granted primary control over our thinking and our discourse about educational reform. Agricultural, aesthetic, and spiritual metaphors also have their place – as do many other metaphors for knowledge and for the educational process. But we are trained to be complex, higher-order thinkers: We should have little difficulty in maintaining a place for content and practices that cannot be easily rationalized even while we assess and justify the value of our discipline, our curriculum, and our pedagogy in economic

terms. A metaphor – like a budget or a curriculum plan – is no more than a tool, to be used where it can provide leverage and put aside when it gets in the way.

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