

Sacrificing education just for productivity?

Productivity — the savior of the University. Like an Arthurian hero riding up on horseback to save the day, productivity is being heralded as the solution to two of the University's most pressing problems — a shrinking budget and an expanding enrollment.

The idea, as it is commonly expressed, is that by increasing productivity, the University can serve more students and spend less money doing so.

Most of the time the claim should be taken with a grain of salt. Students and taxpayers should raise their eyebrows with skepticism whenever productivity is touted as a way to "get more for less." It rarely works that way.

But every once in a while, it does.

As part of the quest for increased productivity, the University Assembly decided earlier this term to change the credit value for certain courses. Many classes currently worth three credits each will soon be worth four, beginning fall 1994.

Of course, this means that graduating in four years will be easier. Most students are happy to hear that. After all, who wants to stay in school an extra year and pay an extra year's tuition?

However, since merely increasing the credit value of a course hardly means increasing its educational value, some students might ask whether they are getting the same amount of education as they did before. And assuming that the University is here to educate, rather than just dispense degrees, that is a serious question in need of answer.

The question is easily answered when it comes to lower division courses. Although the amount of time spent in lecture in most of these courses will remain the same as before (roughly three hours a week), an extra hour will be added as a required supplement to each class, making up the fourth credit. Computer labs and GTF-led discussion classes, among other possibilities, are being considered as ways of giving students that fourth hour.

However, some of the courses which are going up to four credits — particularly those at the upper division level — may not actually involve any increase in seat time. Unless the class instructors miraculously manage to cram more information into the same amount of time, then a credit increase may not be warranted.

As long as the University makes good on its promises, and resists the temptation to just inflate each course's credit value without also correspondingly increasing its level of education, then students will surely benefit from the changes.

However, students should keep a watchful eye out to make sure that that actually happens. No one wants the University to water down its degrees in its quest to increase productivity.

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COMMENTARY

History leads to tolerance

By Dr. Linda Schele

Contrary to expectations, the first history of the Americans, one whose writing began when Rome was still a republic, continues in an unbroken tradition today.

The Spanish ended the use of the ancient writing systems and replaced it with their own letters, but they did not in the tradition of history among the Maya. The books of history and prophecy called the Chilam Balam are still being kept and written today. They are the Ah Tzib, the scribe, of the Cruzob Maya of Quintana Roo, Mexico. And the ancient inscriptions of the Maya hold more than just history, because the political events and the lives of the individuals recorded in these inscriptions played themselves out within a world view that explained what it is to be human, how humanity relates to other living beings, where we come from, where we are going, what is justice, good government, social expectation and moral behavior.

It is a view of the world so powerful and adaptive that it survives today among the numerous Mayan communities even after 500 years of deliberate and deadly suppression. That history has the potential of changing the way all of us, whether we are descendants of recent immigrants or more ancient ones, perceive the past of the New World in which we all live.

Archaeology is a discipline that studies the past as a way of understanding the present and the nature of being human. During the past three decades, the archaeology of the Maya has been transformed from a prehistoric field into a historical one because of the on-going deciphering of the Maya writing system. Now we have research available from the two, sometimes opposing, points of view — the outsider's view derived from the "science of archaeology" and the insider's point of view from the deciphering of the Maya writing system and the study of images on them are artifacts of the past.

Both points of view have advantages because people who use them ask different kinds of

questions about the past. The most successful approaches have combined the insider's history with the outsider's interest in how economic, ecological and political systems worked. But as a historian of the Maya past, I believe that we must recognize that "science" also has its limitations.

I do not imply that the insider's view is a perfect one either. All of the epigraphers, who are translating and interpreting this ancient history, are people from the modern European tradition. How is the history we are now writing and the world view we are now reconstructing any less biased by our point of view than any other approach? The answer is that it is not.

World view is so profoundly a part of every human's mental software that I do not believe we can disarm it, but we can try to minimize its effects by becoming aware of the problem and paying attention to it. For me, the important thing is that the histories written by the ancient Maya give them a voice that speaks across the gulf of time and culture. And when the dead speak, we are no longer free to make them into images of what we want them to have been.

The Maya created a written history that is tied to linear time with a precision that far exceeded similar histories in the Old World. It is precise to the day and sometimes to a 12-hour period, and it is full of heroes and villains, ambitions and disasters, and human stories as rich as the lives of Alexander and Augustus that have fascinated many of us. This written history is a potent resource for all Native Americans just as the history of the ancient Greeks and Romans is a source of inspiration for us.

I have no Greek or Roman blood in me because my ancestors came from the Germanic tribes who finally destroyed the Roman Empire. Yet I have been taught my entire life that the foundation of my cultural tradition was Athens and Rome. The native peoples of the United States and Canada are as distant from the ancient Maya as I am from the ancient Romans. But as I learned of Julius Caesar and Claudius as famous people in my

cultural past, so Native Americans may one day learn of Yaxun-Balam, king of Yaxchilan, or Hanab-Pakal, king of Palenque.

For me, this newly recovered history and all its rich detail is an important legacy for all of humanity — world history as it is taught everywhere in the Americas consists mainly of European history. Rarely are other cultural traditions explored, and usually those are only from the Old World. Our children, no matter their ethnic heritage, need to know the emerging history of the ancient Americas.

There were five "cradles of civilization" in the human past, and two of them — Middle America and the Andes — were in the Americas. These cultural traditions coalesced thousands of years before any people from the Old World encountered them. They have much to teach us about what it is and what it had been to be human. It is my hope that one day all children will learn of these great people of the American past just as they learn about the heroes and sages of the Old World. I believe we need to create a world history that includes all of the people of the world.

In the end, it may be less of a question of what is the ethical thing to do and more a question of survival. The world is changing around us in ways we cannot anticipate or control. The Maya and their cousins throughout the Americas have been dying for 500 years as they have fought to salvage their identities and way of living from the disaster of European contact. They are still fighting and dying even as I write these words.

In other parts of the world, ethnic groups are surfacing again and demanding the right to be who they are without penalty or death. The nightmare of Bosnia looms over us all unless we learn to respect other ways of understanding the world and embrace the diversity of the human community with joy. Learning the history and world views of the people of the New World could be a start in fostering tolerance of that diversity.

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Oregon Daily Emerald

The Oregon Daily Emerald is published daily Monday through Friday during the school year and Tuesday and Thursday during the summer by the Oregon Daily Emerald Publishing Co., Inc., at the University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

The Emerald operates independently of the University with offices at Suite 300 of the Erb Memorial Union and is a member of the Associated Press. The Emerald is private property. The unlawful removal or use of papers is prosecutable by law.

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