

CONTACTING US

NEWSROOM:
(541) 346-5511
E-MAIL:
ode@oregon.uoregon.edu

ADDRESS:
Oregon Daily Emerald
P.O. BOX 3159
Eugene, Oregon 97403

ONLINE EDITION: www.uoregon.edu/~ode

PERSPECTIVES

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Sarah Kickler
EDITORIAL EDITOR
Mike Schmierbach
NIGHT EDITOR
Carl Yeh

Learning in industry's shadow

Proposals to ensure the University trains students for high-tech jobs hurt workers and hinder education

Politics, wrote John Dewey, America's leading 20th-century philosopher, "is the shadow cast on society by big business." This shadow's advance, he warned, can threaten the process of democracy itself because "business for private profit can be reinforced by ... means of publicity and propaganda."

American thinkers have a long tradition of resisting the homogenizing tendency of profit motive run amok. One of the tools they have used is free and inspiring education. It is enlightening to keep this in mind when considering State Senate Bill 504, an industry-designed bill to boost funding for high-technology education.

OPINION



Jeff Shaw

This \$5 million plan was submitted by the Engineering and Technology Industry Council and approved by the Oregon State Board of Higher Education. By the end of this month, the education board hopes to persuade the Oregon State Emergency Board to release the funding.

To the credit of the bill's sponsors, they have been refreshingly honest about their motives. The plan was created "in response to industry needs," to quote Lisa Stevens of the Oregon State System of Higher Education, and not student concerns. This action by the industry council, according to Chancellor Joseph Cox, "sets a precedent for higher education — industry partnerships" and, more ominously, "directs the delivery of educational services toward targets set by industry."

That's right, they're using tax dollars to mold the delivery of educational services. Students have no role in the equation. Their place is not to give input on programs they want or need; they are simply "targets set." This choice of language is not insignificant: Rather than people with concerns, students and workers are relegated to instruments, tools. This kind of thinking reverses the way we should make decisions about education in a democracy.

We have been warned, after all. Dewey noted that since "a democratic society repudiates the principle of external authority, it must find a substitute in voluntary disposition and interest; these can only be created by education." That is, the purpose of education is not to simply funnel resources where private profit can best be wrung from them; education is designed to foster the kind of critical thinking that keeps any "external authority" honest.

This line of thinking has far-reaching roots. John Locke, for instance, concluded, "The business of education is not to make the young perfect in any one of the sciences, but so to open and dispose their minds as may best make them capable of any, when they shall apply themselves to it."

There is also the fact that this legislation is designed to use public funds to bolster private profits, to the expense of most workers in the high-technology industries. In utilizing state funds, the corporations involved continue a long tradition of public subsidies for high-tech businesses. We pay to provide the raw material, and they reap the benefits of a bountiful supply of workers.

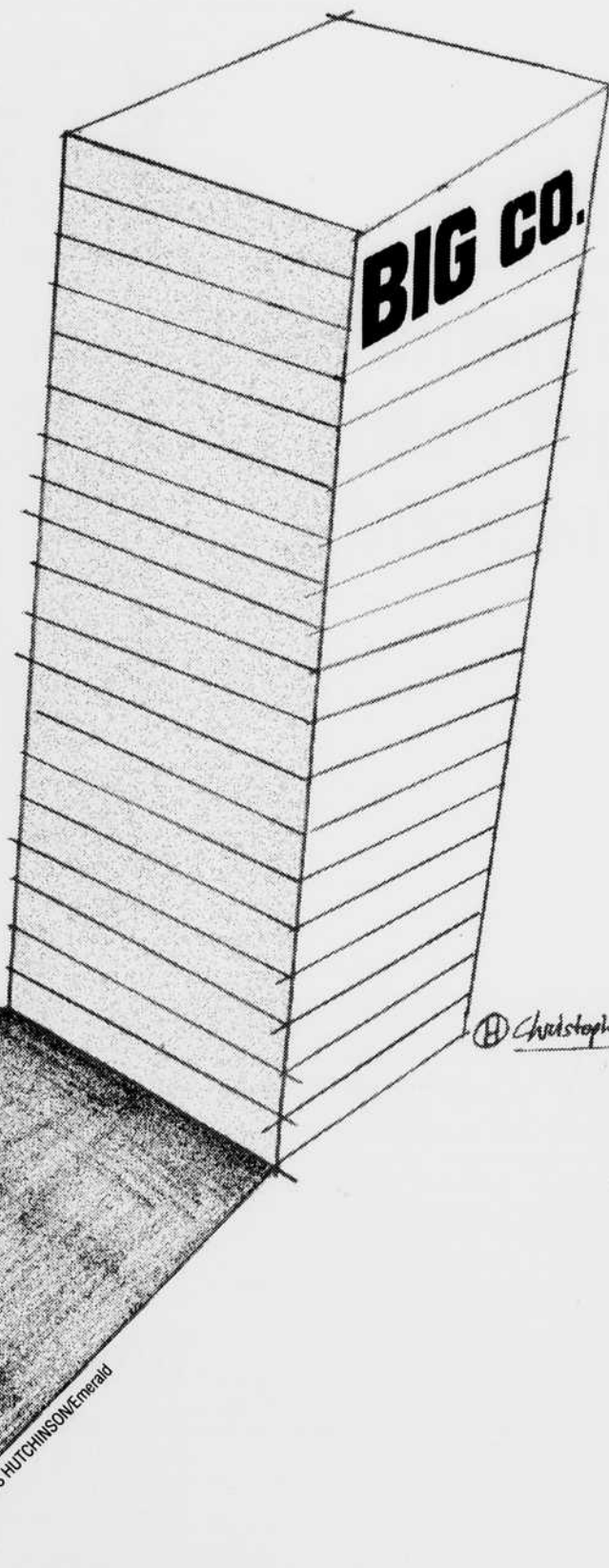
Indeed, the most disturbing part of policies like this bill is how normal they seem to economic writers in the mainstream media. Joel Kotkin of The Los Angeles Times worries that the lack of high-tech personnel could cause "wage pressures" that might "cut into corporate profits." In translation, that means workers might get more of the pie and corporations less.

Consider Senate Bill 504 in this context: The public pays the bill for employee training, eliminating an expense for the businesses involved; the fact that there are more workers means they can pay less for existing workers due to the new lack of "wage pressure." As an intended side effect, the bountiful labor pool also gives workers who choose to organize less leverage in a labor dispute. No wonder Cox is so excited about these "partnerships."

Unfortunately, Cox and the public really are partners in a sense. We, the public, play the traditional role of a "silent partner" by providing the financial backing for such a venture without having a say in it.

The politics of business cast a shadow that continues to spread. The more it spreads, though, the more likely people are to notice — and if they are unwilling partners, to refuse to be silent. Senate Bill 504 provides an opportunity to do just that.

Jeff Shaw is a columnist for the Emerald. His work appears on alternate Wednesdays. His views do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.



COMMUNITY BRIEFS

