

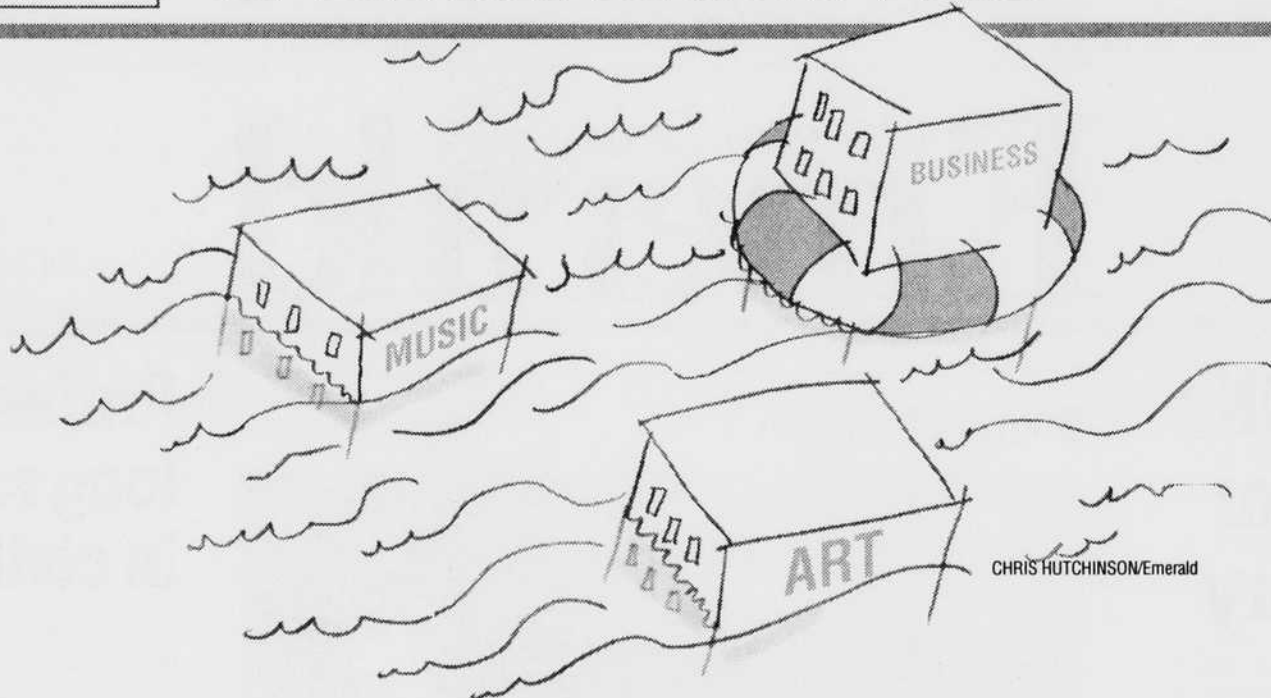
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Business influence could sink university system

The growing ties between business and education are combining with decreasing corporate tax revenues to hurt students

Molly Ivins is fond of reminding people that in Texas, "business" is pronounced "bidness." Here in Oregon, we have our own way of pronouncing the word — say it with me, now — "education."

Big business has always tried to influence higher education. In Oregon, though, a combination of shady politics, misguided policy and inattention to history threatens to let big business swallow the Oregon University System whole.



Jeff Shaw

Want shady politics? How about this: The Oregon Business Council and the Associated Oregon Industries crafted a bill, SB 919, designed to implement pro-business policy changes in OUS. Herb Ashkenasy, president of the OUS board, is also a board member of Associated Oregon Industries. Essentially, he lobbied himself to accept his own vision

for higher education reform.

It isn't just Ashkenasy. When Gov. John Kitzhaber formulated his task force on higher education in 1997, he appointed Duncan Wyse, president of the Oregon Business Council, to staff it. Not surprisingly, Wyse stacked the task force with corporate types like Tom Imeson of the Fortune 500 company PacificCorp and Don Van Luvanee, CEO of Electro Scientific Industries. As Ed Dennis of the Oregon Student Association has said, the task force is composed of "business leaders who are proud that they don't know anything about higher education — it's just a disaster."

The disaster manifests itself in a few ways. First, students get fewer and fewer options for educational opportunities. SB 919 establishes a set of "performance indicators" which are "customer-driven" — and no, the customer isn't you. It's PacificCorp, Electro Scientific Industries and other employers. So university services, as a result of SB 919, are to be evaluated and funded based on how well they meet the needs of business. The implication? If business doesn't

make a profit based on your degree program, your degree program is in danger.

Some might not see the problem with this at first. Everyone wants a job, they might say. Shouldn't we be asking how university courses might help us achieve this goal?

There's certainly nothing wrong with wanting to find a job, but there are a lot of reasons this shouldn't be our only calculus.

Most important, Oregon business doesn't really care if you find a job or not. Business is about profit, not full employment. It's not a coincidence that most of the education programs the Oregon Business Council and Associated Oregon Industries want to fund are high-tech training programs. With few qualified workers, high-tech corporations have to pay the workers available a living wage.

That's why the industry-sponsored SB 504 pushed through \$5 million in funding for high-tech education: pushing down wages increases profit margins. That's why Ashkenasy et al. are infiltrating the higher education system. No longer do

they have to spend private funds on training; with their newfound influence, they can get the taxpayer to pick up the tab.

And bear the burden of a failing education system. New Jersey has already tried a remarkably similar experiment in higher education under Gov. Christine Todd Whitman. The results?

In New Jersey's four-year colleges and universities, tuition and fees have gone up 22 percent and are scheduled to see additional increases of between 10 and 14 percent by the end of 1998, according to Professor Steven Shalom of William Patterson University.

Sound familiar?

If it doesn't, this should: Whitman bragged in 1997 that she had "cut a host of business taxes to create a more favorable climate for business expansion." In her State of the State Address, she bragged about a number of higher education institutions partnering up with industry in a way New Jersey had never seen.

This is just what Chancellor Joe Cox of OUS means when he brags that Oregon's changes will force colleges to

"direct the delivery of educational services toward targets set by industry."

The consequences: "The colleges point out that they have been forced to raise tuition to make up for inadequate funding from Trenton, which has been covering an increasingly smaller share of their budgets," Shalom writes.

Here's the upshot: Our tax revenues are enough to pay for meaningful and fulfilling education if businesses pay their fair share. But they don't want to pay their fair share. They'd rather use someone else's tax money to eliminate their own training expenses. And if decreasing tax revenues means eliminating programs, which programs do you think get the axe? Programs business can use? Or programs students want?

With business leaders in such positions of influence, we shouldn't be surprised what the answer is. Ivins might call this "bidness as usual."

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Minority faculty

The Oregon Students of Color Coalition recently indicated that the Department of Special Education and Community Resources in the College of Education has no tenured or tenured-track professors of color. We are writing to indicate that of the 10 tenured or tenured-track professors in our department, two professors are of color. We ask that the coalition check the accuracy of its statistics before making statements of such importance and provide a correction to its report. We agree that the University must strive to increase the diversity of its student body and faculty and instruction and curriculum. Our department places high value on student, staff and faculty applicants from diverse backgrounds, and many of our faculty conduct research and teach course work that addresses diversity issues and concerns.

**George Sugal
Edward Kameenui**
Professors, Special Education

Support farmworkers

Farmworkers in Oregon don't enjoy rights many of us take for granted, such as paid breaks and overtime pay.

Farmworkers who dare speak out about substandard living and working conditions are subject to firing, eviction from company-owned housing and even physical violence. At Coleman Farms in St. Paul, Ore., Gabriel Solis has been fired, and he and his family are being evicted from the trailer where they live for supporting his union, Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN). Solis, after 18 years working for the Colemans, was making \$7 an hour, working 12-14 hour shifts six days a week with no benefits when he was fired. Last year the Colemans had to pay out a large settlement to workers who sued them for the bad conditions in their labor camp. Now, the Colemans are trying to make an example out of Solis to send the message that if you speak out about problems on the farm, you'll be fired and evicted, too.

The Colemans are banking on the fact that consumers will continue to buy the products they and other NORPAC Food growers produce in spite of their mistreatment of farmworkers. As long as consumers buy NORPAC's FLAV-R-PAC brand frozen fruits and vegetables and Gardenburgers, which are distributed by NORPAC's sales and distribution arm, the Colemans feel they have free reign to

do as they please on the farm.

But things aren't going well for the Colemans. Their phone has been ringing off the hook with calls from farmworker supporters nationwide demanding the reinstatement of Solis and pledges of increased boycott activism until the Colemans finally sit down and negotiate with PCUN, Oregon's farmworker union. Due to public pressure, they've had to back off their demands for Solis, his wife and their four children to vacate their trailer with only a week's notice. But more pressure is needed.

NORPAC and Gardenburger products are currently being sold at the University. It's time for the University to stop selling these products. Currently, over 100 stores and five universities nationwide have committed to no longer selling FLAV-R-PAC or Gardenburger products. Gardenburger, by doing business with NORPAC Food Sales, the sales and distribution arm of NORPAC, is subsidizing the Colemans and all other NORPAC growers' sales and distribution costs. Furthermore, Gardenburger has gone on record claiming conditions for farmworkers "weren't that bad." Tell that to Solis.

Erik Nicholson
Campaign Coordinator, PCUN