

Business: Reports backs liberal arts

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ricula at Oregon universities. Recommendations, including possible ways higher education can best adjust and accommodate the demands of business, are outlined in a June 1996 report titled "The Need For Customer-Driven Higher Education."

The principal participants in the discussions and research that led to this report were the Oregon Business Council, a group of Portland CEOs; Associate Oregon Industries, a business lobbying organization; and the Oregon Council of the American Electronics Association, a trade association of the high-tech industry.

The principal customer or consumer of higher education referred to in this report is Oregon business, said Julie Brandis, a legislative representative with Associated Oregon Industries who worked on the report.

Many in the business community are pushing for a shift toward high-tech curriculums in higher education, Brandis said. The idea is to send Oregon university graduates into the work force tailored to meet the needs of Oregon businesses.

The business community is also interested in finding graduates who are strong in the liberal-arts skills that Whitelaw considers critical to long-term mobility and success. Brandis emphasized the business community's reliance on liberal-arts programs to provide a strong basic skill base that is essential for every professional.

"The value of higher education is that it does liberal arts extremely well right now," Brandis said. "We don't see the need for more technical skills as taking

the place of liberal arts. They enhance each other; there's a need for both."

The June 1996 report echoed these sentiments, calling "intellectual curiosity, critical-thinking skills and the ability to communicate and work with other people ... the hallmarks of employees who make business more competitive and successful."

Despite business' apparent emphasis on liberal-arts skills, some educators say these skills will fall by the wayside as the demand for skilled high-tech employees grows.

An increased reliance on business dollars may cause universities to lose control of curriculums, said Julia Fox, a University sociology instructor. She described the positioning of business contributions in higher education as "strategic philanthropy."

"The logic of business is profit maximization," said Fox, who has been researching business ties with higher education institutions since 1993. "Strategic philanthropy" involves a business contributing dollars in a way that will be most beneficial to the business, she said.

The demand for shifts in higher education curriculum is a direct result of "strategic philanthropy," Fox said. Lobbying efforts and direct contributions have produced curriculum changes, such as a new graduate software engineering program at Portland State University scheduled to begin this fall. Programs such as these will ultimately benefit business by producing highly skilled and specialized employees, she said.

While business emphasizes the

liberal arts, Fox said she fears for these programs because they are not immediately demanded.

"The curriculum will be changed; students are going to lose out," she said. "The university is not being driven by students' needs. The university is being driven by business' needs."

The differences between what is best for students and what is best for business is debatable, said Duncan Wyse, president of the Oregon Business Council.

Part of the problem is a lack of communication between students and business leaders, Wyse said. The student perception is often that in order to get a job in business, students must first earn a degree in business. But that is not always the case. Many businesses demand stronger backgrounds in liberal arts, he said.

"The business community is pushing harder than anybody to see the liberal arts emphasized," Wyse said. "The cumulative effect of curriculum needs to include liberal arts."

While the debate rages on, no one knows exactly what is in store for higher education as it carries new demands from both students and businesses into the future. Some scholars fear that traditional liberal arts will be lost in the wake of business' increasingly influential involvement in higher education. Business leaders maintain that liberal-arts skills are absolutely essential to produce elite professionals and that the programs are not in jeopardy.

At any rate, continued discussion and analysis of Oregon's educational and economic needs is planned for the coming months.

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