

PERSPECTIVES

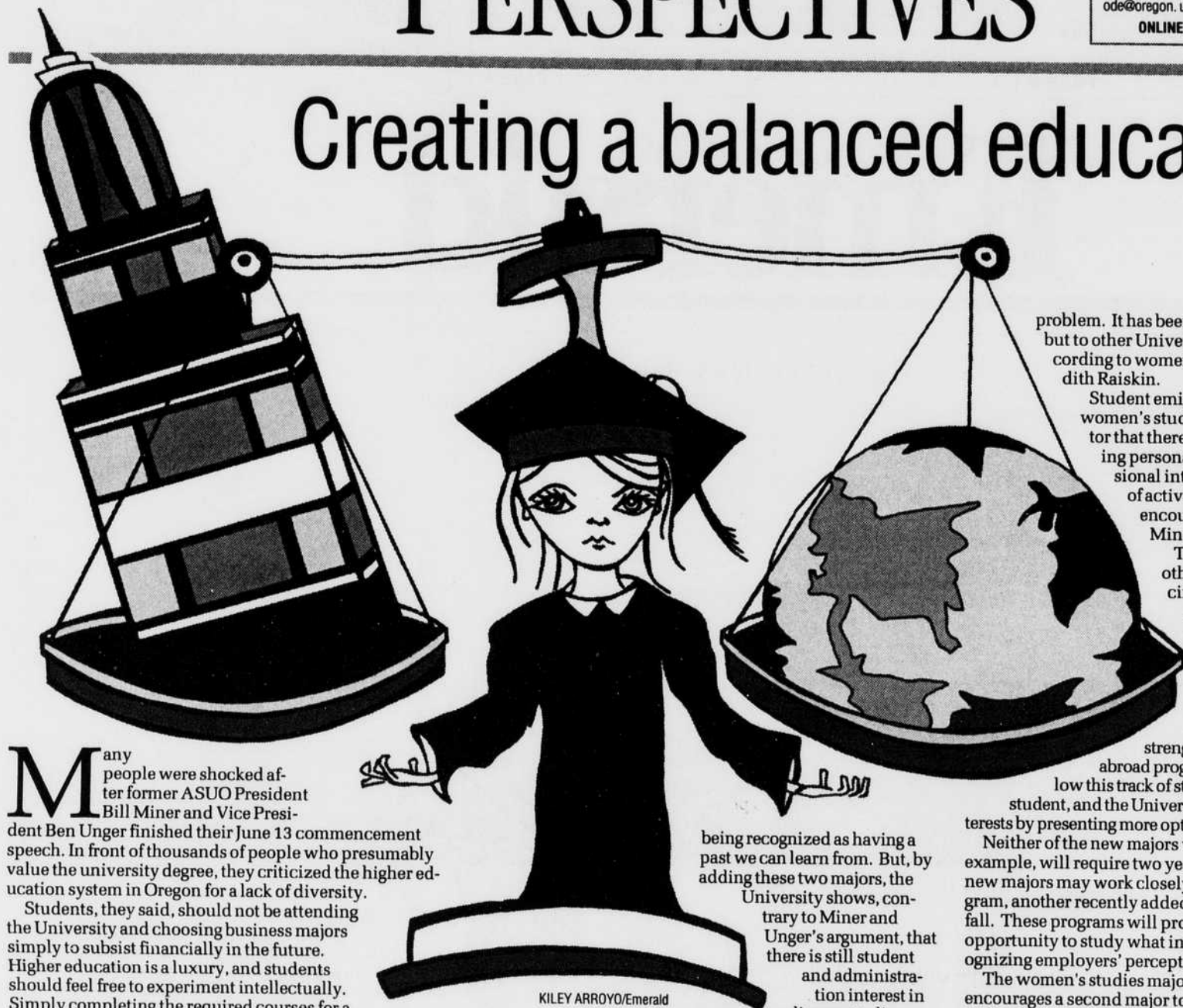
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Creating a balanced education



Many people were shocked after former ASUO President Bill Miner and Vice President Ben Unger finished their June 13 commencement speech. In front of thousands of people who presumably value the university degree, they criticized the higher education system in Oregon for a lack of diversity.

Students, they said, should not be attending the University and choosing business majors simply to subsist financially in the future. Higher education is a luxury, and students should feel free to experiment intellectually. Simply completing the required courses for a marketing major is not enough, they said.

Although their statements prompted jeering from some troubled students and families, it seems that the University has given the nod to Miner and Unger by announcing the addition of two new majors a mere six days after their speech. The new majors — women's studies and Judaic studies — rank near the pinnacle of diverse majors. These are two historically oppressed groups of people that are now

being recognized as having a past we can learn from. But, by adding these two majors, the University shows, contrary to Miner and Unger's argument, that there is still student and administrative interest in diverse studies.

Directly addressing Miner and Unger's arguments, it is true that these majors are not as useful as a business degree for most people. They are correct that this mentality has funneled more students into business majors because they can't make as much money with a more diverse degree. And women's studies — which has been offered as a minor and graduate program on campus for more than two decades — has had the opposite

problem. It has been losing students for years — but to other Universities that offer a major, according to women's studies program director Judith Raiskin.

Student emigration to schools with women's studies majors is a definite indicator that there are students out there pursuing personal interests, as well as professional interests. This is exactly the kind of activity the University should be encouraging, and it is the activity Miner and Unger were referring to. The Judaic studies major is another subject that appeals to specific interests. There has been a push for the major on campus for 15 years, according to Richard Stein, chair of the Judaic Studies Steering Committee. The subject, which will be offered in 1999 as a major and a minor, is

strengthened by a University study-abroad program in Israel. Students who follow this track of study are not the stereotypical student, and the University is acting in students' best interests by presenting more options such as this.

Neither of the new majors will be easy. Judaic studies, for example, will require two years of modern Hebrew. Both new majors may work closely with the ethnic studies program, another recently added major that will begin in the fall. These programs will provide students with more of an opportunity to study what interests them, and they are recognizing employers' perceptions of the degrees.

The women's studies major will require a minor, and it encourages a second major to provide a broader educational experience, Raiskin said. This is the right thing to do because students can pursue their interests and still attain marketable job skills.

Miner and Unger have received their wish, but now it's time for students to take advantage of opportunities such as these two new majors.

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses may be sent to ode@oregon.uoregon.edu.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Education threatened

Every now and then, I believe that individuals in our society are waking up to the realities and responsibilities of the world beyond their own self-serving interests. Then I read the Emerald, Tuesday's letter to the editor (ODE, June 23) called Bill Miner and Ben Unger's commencement speech "incoherent, babbling, nonsensical nonsense." Obviously, Dayna Terry missed the point of the speech and the entire educational experience.

Bill and Ben did take a chance in writing a speech that challenged not only our university but the graduates. What was the point of their speech? The point quite simply was that our university, the educational experience, and our ability to make a difference is being threatened by corporate-driven, profit-oriented, self-serving interests. Education for education's sake is at risk. Make no mistake, even if you don't see it, our world and education is driven by the consumer mentality. "Go to school, make more money, buy a bigger house, get a promotion, buy a better car, etc..." Who

benefits from this? The corporate, the upper crust and the wealthy at the expense of the rest of us. This is the reality.

Bill and Ben's brave commencement speech was intended to challenge us to take risks, support education for education's sake, and to make a difference in our crippled society. That was the point, even if you missed it.

Melissa Watson
Political Science

Neutrality impossible

In February 1997, MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicanos de Aztlan) collected more than 400 student signatures supporting PCUN's boycott of Gardenburger on the University of Oregon campus. The Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United (PCUN) called a boycott of NORPAC Foods after NORPAC growers fired workers when they went on strike for better wages. According to PCUN, "Member growers repeatedly violate farmworker rights by refusing them decent housing, livable wages, the rights to breaks and overtime pay, and the denial of basic

rights of workers." In addition, as PCUN points out, "Workers who dare to struggle to change these conditions face eviction from these grower-owned housing, firing and even physical violence." NORPAC Food Sales is the sales department and the executive sales agent for NORPAC Foods. PCUN called for a boycott of Wholesome and Hearty Foods for not respecting the NORPAC Foods boycott by using NORPAC Food Sales as one of its distributors.

University President Dave Frohnmayer said the administration would not support the boycott because the University must be "politically neutral" (ODE, Feb. 18, 1997). In the past, the University of Oregon administration supported the farmworkers' boycott of table grapes. Why the shift in policy? We believe that the recent increases in corporate investments into universities shifted the balance of power and imposed constraints on Frohnmayer to side with agribusiness in this political struggle between the farmworkers and the owners.

We found extensive financial ties between the University of Oregon, Nike and

NORPAC. In 1994, Nike acquired full marketing rights in Japan from Nissho Iwai, the large Japanese trading company. In addition, Nissho Iwai has a contract with NORPAC Food to supply Japan's market for frozen and canned corn. The Northwest produces about two-thirds of the 43,000 tons of frozen sweet corn consumed each year in Japan, and perhaps a third of the 84,000 tons of canned corn.

We wonder how "politically neutral" the University of Oregon may be given Nissho Iwai's and Nike's financial contribution to the University. We also wonder how we may be neutral given the balance of power between the growers and the farmworkers. In a different historical time, when boycotts were used to break Jim Crow laws, we wonder what neutrality would really mean. A position of "neutrality" would have meant support for the racist White Citizens' Councils. During a political struggle, we can't be neutral. The question is: What side are you on?

Julia D. Fox
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