The Revolving Door: Teaching and Not Teaching Writing at a For-Profit University

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> Oh, what a world of profit and delight,
> Of power, of honour, of omnipotence,
> Is promised to the studious artisan!
> —Doctor Faustus (1.1.52-54)

When the new breed of for-profit universities such as the University of Phoenix began emerging in the late 1970s, they served as "degree completion" programs for students who had fulfilled general education requirements elsewhere. However, the recent trend has been for such schools to develop comprehensive educational offerings for associate and baccalaureate degrees. The federal government's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES IPEDS) database currently lists 405 institutions that self-identify as four-year, for-profit postsecondary institutions, while a 2003 *Business Week* article estimated the number of degree-granting for-profits at 800, nearly all accredited, up from 319 in 1990 (Symonds). To meet accreditation requirements, baccalaureate degrees require general education classes in addition to career training, and thus new courses in college-level writing have been added to course offerings around the country.

But how is writing taught in such institutions, and by whom? What do students do in such writing classes, and how is instruction received by them? While recent articles, books, and conferences have discussed the legal structures, finances, and operations of for-profit schools, less is known about the actual curriculum and the day-to-day experiences of teachers and students in such institutions. I see these questions as significant for three reasons: first, as for-profit schools grow in number and influence, writing classes they offer will increasingly influence the ways writing is conceived of as an academic subject for increasingly significant numbers of students, faculty in and out of the discipline of composition stud-

ies, and administrators. Both students and instructors at for-profit schools frequently "cross over;" that is, they enroll or work at both for-profit and traditional schools at various times. When they enter traditional schools, they bring the conceptions of writing and writing instruction developed at for-profit schools with them.

Second, because the private sector evolves rapidly and in response to market forces, writing instruction is different in for-profits than in traditional schools. The traditional academy should examine the differences as a way of seeing what we have normalized, erased, or come to imply but not understand about teaching in traditional not-for-profit schools.

Last, I believe it's important to know and understand the types of writing instruction that occur in for-profit settings because all higher education institutions, from community colleges to Ivy League universities, are subject to an ongoing move toward corporatization. This trend comes from decreasing public funding, increasing demand from students for workplace and "relevant" skills, and increasing focus on profitability, even in the public sector. The teaching and learning that occurs in for-profit schools, then, can help indicate what not-for-profit schools can expect as they too move toward business models and budget-driven policies.

Between December 2003 and June 2004 I worked as a curriculum consultant and writing instructor at a new for-profit school that I refer to as Hybrid University. During my six months there I kept meticulous notes about my experiences, about policies and evolutions of policies, and about the corporate-academic-hybrid culture I was a part of. I also collected documents from the school, including mailings, website information, catalogs, and Company documents sent to faculty and staff. In order to be certain that I do not identify people or organizations against their will, I shall, in this essay, use pseudonyms for all people I mention in the narrative, even those who granted permission for their names to be used. I also omitted details that make the school identifiable, including three sources that provide background information but are not cited in this essay.

This narrative is not scholarly research in the traditional sense; it is neither empirical, with control groups and test groups, nor is it ethnographic in the strictest sense. But as Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly explain in *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, narration can be an epistemic exercise, yielding new insight into events through the "richness and expression" of lived experience because "stories lived and told educate the self and others" (xxvi). I find narrative, and especially teacher narratives, a productive way to discuss not just events in education, but subject-positions in which teachers and students find themselves. It is useful for me to keep in mind that the schools are one of Louis Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses designed to maintain and reproduce the status quo. The stories we tell about schools and schooling emerge only from the identities from which we are permitted to speak. In the case of for-profit education, we are interpellated as teachers and scholars, but also as customer support representatives, servants, and complicit business partners

in institutions seeking profit. A teacher narrative functions not just as reflection but as a potential roadmap for future action. As Susan Miller explains in *Textual Carnivals*,

> Power is, at its roots, telling our own stories. Without "good" stories to rely on, no minority or marginalized majority has a chance to change its status, or, more importantly, to identify and question the "bad" tales that create it. (1)

A narrative about writing instruction at a for-profit university is one way to capture events, explore the various interpellated subjectivities that experience those events, and imagine possibilities for future teaching. As the for-profit sector grows both in size and influence, a teacher-narrative from within can help us all understand what we might expect in the universities of the future.

The University of the Future

Hybrid University, which opened its doors for its first class in January 2004, inhabited leased space on two floors of neighboring midrises in an upscale corporate center. The silver buildings sported tasteful company logos for investment bank offices, national law firm branches, and successful local businesses. To enter the school's corporate headquarters (what people at other schools call "Admin"), I would pass through the revolving door, nod at the uniformed man at the security desk, and take the silent, chrome elevator to the top. The lobby floors were polished black tile, and the wall art was both original and good.

Campus—known as "the instructional space"—was two buildings over on the third floor. Students and faculty walked through a connecting hallway and outside through a parking lot, then took the elevator up. Just off the elevator there was a vestibule painted bright yellow with a receptionist desk. A student affairs assistant named Katie would sit at that post, pleasantly greeting students as they signed in for the day. Behind reception were spacious classrooms with wireless internet for everyone's laptops and banks of windows with city views. The appearance of the campus was always upscale corporation, with no hint of the traditional spaces and accoutrements of academia: no library, no ivy, no football stadium, no beige-tiled hallways with identical classrooms and immovable desks. Instead, students were greeted as respected corporate employees might be, and they entered workspace that was decidedly corporate and professional.

When I taught there, Hybrid U was just beginning classes, and there were fewer than eighty students in two cohorts, one that began school in January and the second in March. However, enrollment was expected to grow exponentially, and forecasts from market research envisioned a campus of 5,000 computer science majors within a few years. By 2007, the school's business plan projects 1,200 graduates a year—which is more than five times the

number of computer science graduates from MIT in a given year. Gender representation in the two initial cohorts was typical of computer science majors around the country; about ninety percent of students were male and ten percent were female.

The idea of Hybrid University began in 2001 when three business partners with experience in marketing and technology joined together to look for a new profit-making venture. They researched a number of possibilities before deciding to found a school, and soon they had a business plan in place. They secured Series A funding in September 2002 and $13 million in Series B funding from a private equity firm specializing in educational investments in June 2003. The founders also sought and secured the backing of global technology corporations that have donated equipment and teaching materials to the school. The arrangement promised to be mutually beneficial; Hybrid University students would work on real-world projects provided by their corporate sponsors. The sponsoring corporations would employ students as low-cost labor during school and take first pick among graduates for new employees. And because of the close collaboration between the school and industry, all graduates would have a ready-made network of business connections.

In choosing to open a school, the founders identified an area of genuine need in education. Research from the U.S. Department of Commerce had indicated that computer science curriculum and instruction at many schools was outdated and graduates were ill-prepared for productive work in industry. Hybrid University responded to this concern with a program that offers students computer knowledge as well as people skills and critical thinking abilities. Hybrid University distinguishes itself from other for-profit and traditional schools in the promise of an education that is a hybrid of classroom experience, hands-on training, and genuine corporate work. The school is otherwise distinguished by its vast technology resources. Each new student is issued a high-end laptop and cutting-edge software. The classrooms have ceiling mounted LCD projectors and the entire campus is wireless. Most teaching materials are housed in an online repository, and instructors are required to post lecture notes. Students turn in all assignments—including "papers"—in an electronic format, and instructors send feedback and grades electronically as well. Email contact between students and instructors is a primary form of communication, and instructors are expected to respond quickly to email inquiries, even outside of business hours. The central learning system repository is proprietary software, designed by one of the school's first computer science professors. Overall, the campus technology has worked amazingly well.

The school currently offers a bachelor's degree in Computer Science, but it is called a university because the founders initially envisioned offering a master's degree in Enterprise Informatics as well. The school is fully accredited, and writing classes are part of a complete general education track required of all students. If all goes well, students receive their bachelor's degrees after ten terms

of ten weeks each, paying $60,000 in tuition for the accelerated program. Nearly all students I worked with borrowed tuition money through government programs and private lenders. Federally subsidized student-loan programs are the bread and butter of for-profit schools, and Hybrid U was no exception in this regard.

Getting in on the Ground Level

My own experience as a writing teacher began in 1989 when I worked as a teaching assistant for an honors section of first-year college writing. Since then, I have worked as a graduate teaching assistant, adjunct lecturer, and assistant director of composition in a total of eight academic institutions, including a private religious university, the City College of New York, a community college in post-steel-mill Pennsylvania, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and a prestigious independent high school. I had a master's degree in rhetoric and composition. My hope was to earn a PhD and seek a tenure-track position at a Research I university, preferably a school that would allow me to design curriculum and work as a Writing Program Administrator as well as be supportive of Composition Studies as a field of intellectual inquiry. I had just finished my PhD exams when I came across the classified ad for a part-time faculty member at Hybrid University.

Given my conventional aspirations to be a "real" academic, it may seem odd that I chose to take a job at a for-profit school. But when I started, I saw potential. For one thing, I considered myself to be open-minded about the possibilities of for-profit education. I knew the risks articulated by composition scholars of framing writing as a simple utilitarian skill, something that for-profit schools do famously. Still, I was willing to entertain the idea that vocationalism might not always be a sellout, and that helping students write to accomplish their own ends—even when those ends were more economic than scholarly—might not be an inappropriate goal for an writing instructor. I wrote in my notes,

> I don't see [Hybrid U] as a competing model or as a corrupted version of the traditional academy. It can be seen as an alternative that serves students who otherwise might not be in postsecondary education at all. Is this a democratic entity that balances out the elitism of the traditional academy?

I knew that for-profit schools served a disproportionately high number of students who were of color and first-generation college students; for-profit schools also typically enrolled a disproportionately high number of older and returning students, who were more likely to have families, jobs, and other obligations not known to the typical eighteen-year-old student at a state university or private college. Maybe Hybrid University could offer education to students who otherwise couldn't get it; maybe in a hybrid business-aca-

demic setting, writing could be taught in ways that were meaningful and immediately useful to the students.

Perhaps I was naïve. I might also have been too cynical. As a compositionist I was already well aware that the traditional academy produced compliant workers to serve capitalist needs and carried out inequitable social sorting; as Richard Ohmann points out, "The traditional university conveyed inequality as effectively as does 'market-driven' higher education today" (*Politics of Knowledge* 85). I also knew writing programs in particular were guilty of unethical labor practices (Bousquet 3–4). While for-profits were often condemned for their money motives, hadn't I already been complicit in corporatized institutions and exploited as contingent labor at traditional schools? Didn't for-profit schools just do openly what traditional schools did covertly? Even though this job didn't fulfill my long-term aspirations for traditional tenure-track work, I was willing to give it a try.

The job interview itself was a heady experience. The dean of academics, Leslie, and her assistant, Anne, interviewed me and expressed an infectious enthusiasm about the potential they saw at this school. It was a project-based, student-centered curriculum, they said, and my writing classes would be an integral part of the students' learning. All students were computer science majors with genuine work projects from the first term onward, and all of them would need to use writing to inquire, record their experiences, communicate with real-life clients, and carry out real work. They would have exigent needs and authentic audiences for their writing, and that context would motivate students to learn to use writing to accomplish specific purposes, address target audiences, and persuade others to think or act in specific ways. Marilyn Cooper, in her farewell essay as editor of *College Composition and Communication*, articulated this question as one of two central concerns for composition: "How can we involve students in writing classes in real, productive work?" (13). Hybrid U had one potential answer; it seemed to me an ideal rhetorical situation, where genuine student needs could prompt extraordinary opportunities for learning to write.

Furthermore, my interviewers were excited about me, they told me. The school was about to enroll its first term of students, and I would be welcome as a faculty member, they said, even though my PhD study was not complete. My work would initially be part time—just two sections of the same course—but as enrollments grew, the opportunities for advancement and increased responsibility would be tremendous. I would have the chance to design and implement a writing program from scratch. I would determine appropriate goals and outcomes, choose texts and other instructional materials, write the syllabus, and design effective assessment tools. The pay was laughable: $875 to design the course (even then I knew curriculum consultants could charge tens of thousands of dollars) and $2,100 per section to teach, with no benefits except the option to contribute to a 401(k) plan with no company match. But the work experience promised to be exceptional, and the thrill

of a project like this—with colleagues and resources and other accoutrements of grown-up, post-grad-school work—was more than I could pass up. I took the job, full of eager anticipation, and to celebrate, Leslie and Anne took me to lunch at a business-crowd restaurant. "Welcome," Leslie told me. "We are so excited to have you on board." I would spend about two and a half months observing the students and school and designing the course during the first term; then in the second term I would begin teaching my course on a schedule of four ten-week terms a year.

Red Flags

I should have seen from the beginning that this class—this whole vision of the future of writing instruction—was not going to work out. One tip-off about the real role of writing instruction in this corporation/school should have been clear when I read a direct mail advertisement the school had sent to a high school student I knew. He should consider Hybrid U, it said, because he would graduate fast and get a good job. In fact, the mailing said, "Your friends at traditional universities may soon be asking you for money. *In just 28 months*, you'll get a Bachelor of Science degree in Computer Science—while frat boys and cheerleaders are still struggling with English 101" (italics emphasis original). There it was, in the school's own promotional material: First-Year Composition as a boogeyman. The advertisement implied that Hybrid University would fast track you right past general education writing courses; who needs to learn to write to make money? Ironically, accreditation and graduation requirements meant that Hybrid students *did* have to take a first-year writing class—my class!—and when it came time to show up, many students were none too happy to be there.

Other marketing materials weren't so bald in denigrating writing classes, but they also indicated the fundamental goal of the university was vastly different from the goals of traditional universities, whose roots grew back to monasteries and gentlemen's culture. A list of goals for postsecondary education made more than a century ago in 1902 describes ideal—if not actual—values of many traditional universities today:

> To preserve and transmit liberal culture; to share useful knowledge with the populace at large; to serve as an agent of beneficial social change in a burgeoning industrial and commercial order; and to serve as a center for disinterested inquiry and the production of new knowledge through research and scholarly writing. (Lucas 86)

Hybrid U did not see itself as part of that history and maintained a much more practical goal: to credential students for high-paying jobs. The 2004 catalogue described the school mission as helping students "in developing relevant, hands-on, marketable skills which enable them to establish careers in software development." Another direct-mail piece had this pitch: "Considering that three

out of the five wealthiest people in the world are software developers, perhaps this is a good field to go into." Marketing materials, including brochures, the school website, and direct mailings, contained statistics from a 2002–2003 U.S. Department of Labor report which predicted fast growth for software engineering jobs and listed current starting salaries of $52,000 per year. The schools brochures emphasized that salary figure, persuading potential students that a Hybrid U degree would show them the money. Thus, Hybrid University sought openly to fulfill what Stanley Aronowitz has said all along is the implicit mission of higher education: the "export of credentialed workers" (8). The school's goal from the outset was to make workers, not scholars. These values, I came to learn, promoted a culture of efficiency that saw the degree as the end goal for students with little concern about the education such a credential traditionally represented.

Another red flag should have come when I saw the local paper's classifieds, with an ad for admissions representatives to work at Hybrid U. The ad was clearly for a sales job rather than an academic counseling job. The ad sought applicants with experience in direct sales and with diverse customers. This sales mindset was further reflected in the Company Personnel Organization Chart posted online. It listed all education functions—everything, including the entire teaching faculty, course designs, instructional materials, student support, everything—under an organizational division called "Product Development" or pDev. The whole mindset of the school was that of a dot.com startup, reflecting the school founders' previous experience in dot.coms and technology. None of them had background in education; however, they seemed to believe that the same skill set and values that had worked for them in business would transfer to education. Their school would sell degrees instead of technological widgets, and willing customers would pay handsomely.

The school's homework policy should have been another red flag that told me I wasn't teaching at a place that valued writing instruction. Any experienced instructor knows that learning to write is a time-consuming, labor intensive endeavor, without many short cuts that can be taken in the name of efficiency. But Hybrid University had promised students that they wouldn't have to do much homework. Hybrid's innovation was that the school day should feel like a business work day; therefore, students should be on campus from about 8 to 4, and they should complete their work within the confines of a business day—and take a full hour lunch break. Then, like young computer programmers who worked in a corporate setting, they would go home and the evening hours would be their own.

The catch for general education courses such as mine, though, was that there was no built-in lab time or study time in the 8 to 4 schedule for students to do out-of-class work. I was told that my class would need to feel like a brown-bag lunch or corporate seminar, the sort of thing that businesses conduct on lunch hours to offer employees continuing education. "We want the learning to take place *in* class," the academic dean, Leslie, told me sincerely.

As a compromise, I was told that I could require up to ninety minutes of out-of-class work per week. This would have to include all outside reading requirements as well as any actual writing students would be asked to do. My quick calculations told me I would be allowed to assign about one-fourth the homework load that I had given at traditional schools. Maybe it should have, but this didn't make me flee from campus. I thought it might be a challenge to overcome, a chance to see what might be done with writing instruction if we thought about it in new ways. In the end I learned what I already knew: students can't learn to write unless they write. But at the beginning, given the enthusiasm of the academic dean, it seemed like a proposition worth trying out.

The biggest red flag of all should have been when I met the Director of Human Resources whom I'll call Greta. She was the entire Human Resources department when I started working at Hybrid U, a loud blond woman with an extensive wardrobe of bright suits who whirled around the cubicles greeting people gaily and inviting them to the conference room for each month's birthday cake. The first day we met she announced cheerfully that though she had an MBA she'd only worked in corporate settings before, never a school. She beamed at me over her sophisticated rectangular glasses, brim full of good will, chatting me up as I filled out employment paperwork. I soon solved the mystery of how she got the HR job with no educational experience: her father was one of the founders.

In that buoyant tone, Greta told me about the school's founding, including the fact that since they hadn't had an accreditation, they had recently bought one. I sat stunned in her office, trying to process that I was going to work for a place that thought it "innovative" to have purchased an accreditation. Greta explained heartily that earning an accreditation takes a lot of time, so for now Hybrid U had bought an accredited school in another state that had been on the verge of bankruptcy. "We're officially their branch campus," she said animatedly. "That means the school is official even though we haven't yet enrolled our own students." I knew even then that an "official" school is code for one in which students qualify to borrow tuition money through federal financial aid programs. Accreditation for many for-profit schools is not a matter of reputation or prestige or even meeting standards. It's about making sure kids have cash to cover big tuition bills.

The Higher Education Act is clear in stating the criteria for defining for-profit institutions of higher education:

> A for-profit institution shall not be considered to be an institution of higher education unless such institution is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association and such institution has been in existence for at least 2 years. (HEA Section 101)

By purchasing an out-of-state school with an accreditation and establishing themselves as a branch campus, Hybrid University

complied fully with state and federal requirements for accreditation. They were accredited and set up to allow students to borrow federal funds long before they had curriculum in place to accredit or students in actual classes.

Greta also emphasized my employment status. In accordance with state employment law, I was an at-will employee, which means the school could terminate me, or any teaching faculty, without notice or cause. I had an official employment agreement that protected the interests of the school but nothing that protected me—certainly no tenure, no union, not so much as a one-term teaching contract. There was also no sense whatsoever of the faculty as an independent, self-governing body. Greta made it clear that as an employee I would follow instructions or be asked to leave. I saw several firings of teaching faculty while I was Hybrid U. My colleague who taught speech was fired, she was told, in large part because she had told a sleeping student that he had to wake up in class. Leslie, the academic dean, explained that embarrassing students is not acceptable at Hybrid University. There was, of course, no system for redress, and my colleague was soon replaced by a more pleasant instructor. Hybrid U's perception of teaching faculty as at-will employees is typical in the for-profit education industry, and protected status for faculty—through tenure or self-government—is seen by for-profit schools as an inefficient relic from past times (Ruch 114; Ohmann, *Politics of Knowledge* 94).

At first I found these corporate quirks fascinating, challenging, and even vaguely amusing: "How interesting that they think they're a school," I thought, "They are really a traditional business, all about earning money, serving the customers, and avoiding liability." I didn't know until later that these corporate overlays and the goal of students learning to write were, at least in my experience, mutually exclusive.

Instructional Space

From the first days of my writing classes, I knew this was a school like no other I'd taught in. This was evident in some small but striking ways. One example is that at Hybrid U the physical space is owned differently. In my years of teaching, I had grown used to having students' recognize that the classroom was mine and they were guests in it, even if I was a mere adjunct or grad student. That's the traditional rule: the space belongs to the teacher, she controls the thermostat, windows, and lights (when they can be controlled); she dismisses students at the end of class, and they file out the door, leaving the teacher alone in her space to erase the board and pack her bag. We rarely talk about this tacit agreement in traditional schools, but it's important because it marks the instructor as the alpha-male of the pack, so to speak—the one who owns the territory and thus makes or delegates all decisions.

At Hybrid U, the students knew the space was theirs, and I was the one invited in to visit. The first day of class, I entered the instructional space early to find students milling around or gaming

online. Students felt free to leave their bags, to come and go before classes, and even to sit in a class for which they were not registered. One student, John, attended my class at least three times, even though he was not enrolled and never asked my permission. He would either work quietly near his friends on an unrelated project or else he'd unexpectedly join a class conversation with insightful comments. I didn't mind his presence, but it made clear to me that the space belonged to students, not me.

For the first few weeks, I was caught off guard when we got to the end of class. There was no bell. I kept wanting to say, "You're dismissed," but it seemed silly to excuse students from their own room. Though the hour was up, there was no indication on the students' part that any shift had been made. Instead, I'd stop talking, pack my bag, and say goodbye, leaving the students chatting at their desks or drifting around the room. I didn't feel bad about this, just surprised; it was de-normalized enough for me that I noticed it every day. I suspected that it changed my ethos. Instead of alpha-male of the wolves, I felt vaguely like the guide dog, which is always fed last so as to reinforce his status as servant. The ownership of the room certainly indicated in a subtle way that I was hired help and not the local authority. The students told me all the rooms felt like this, saying, "This whole school belongs to the students."

Another notable feature of the physical facilities is that they were always construed as a corporate space, not an academic space. Most for-profit schools have eschewed as a waste of money traditional school spaces such as brick-and-mortar libraries and sports fields. Schools like the University of Phoenix choose office buildings near freeways for their branches because they are easily accessible to students and relatively cheap to rent. It is typical of for-profit schools to maintain tidy facilities as part of the "corporate culture" in a "service industry" (Ruch 111). However, Hybrid U is the only school I know of that is actively trying to develop an *upscale* rather than merely clean and functional corporate ethos in their physical facilities. The vestibule chairs were creamy leather, with art deco end tables. The classroom walls were painted soft sage. The banks of windows were enormous, and the views were breathtaking and expensive.

One day I heard Mike, one of the Company founders, telling students about the new campus to which the school would move later in the year. Like the first campus, the second was located in an office midrise, in a fashionable corporate park surrounded by other businesses. Mike told the students that the inspiration for the new look came from Microsoft and the Nike campuses. By this he meant the corporate space operated by these corporate entities, and the goal was for Hybrid University to mimic their physical settings. Mike described the supersize plasma TV and the bright red countertops in the stylish new student lounge, telling his captivated listeners, "The new campus *rocks*." The students nodded intently, listening to Mike and imagining themselves on a corporate campus that rocked. It seemed to me that they saw themselves in this corporate space, not as students and acolytes, but as junior corpo-

rate executives. And given this scene, how is the writing instructor cast? As the hired help, as outside consultant, as customer service representative.

Serving the Customers

The notion that students are customers who need to be well served does not originate with Hybrid University; many scholars have lamented the gradual shift in root metaphors that casts students as customers. This change has come about for many reasons, chief among them the general consumer culture this generation's college students have grown up in. As a result, students are more and more likely to see school as a vehicle for wealth accumulation rather than knowledge or passage into adulthood. As Ohmann puts it, "They are accumulating units of knowledge and skill that they can trade for income, rather than more abstract, class-signifying culture…Education is less a conventional rite of maturation than the route to a good job" (*Politics of Knowledge* 104). This is true at all postsecondary institutions but in particular at for-profits. In a 1997 interview, William Gibbs, then president of the for-profit University of Phoenix, stated the school's understanding of student motivations:

> The people who are our students don't really want the education. They want what the education provides for them—better jobs, moving up in their career, the ability to speak up in meetings, that kind of stuff. (Traub 114)

As Patricia Harkin summarized in an address titled "Teach the Commodities," "Generation Y students pay money to get information, not to learn how it is constructed." Schools such as the University of Phoenix have flourished because they have been willing to provide postsecondary degrees without requiring much intellectual curiosity. Student-consumers have voiced their demands, and the demands have been met.

Non-profit colleges and universities have also adopted practices and policies that treat students-as-customers as a necessary part of their survival; if they don't meet market demands, students won't enroll. As Richard Ohmann puts it, the marketing of schools has become "a far more self-conscious activity than it used to be: universities try to identify their niches, turn their names into brands, develop 'signatures' and slogans" ("Citizenship" 41–42). Many schools across the nation and at various levels of prestige have reported recent efforts to provide upscale dorm rooms, fitness club facilities, more flexible scheduling, and more job-related classes, all in response to student demand.

However, casting students as customers has serious long-term implications. Giroux asserts that consumerist education leaves students ill-prepared for civic participation:

> As market culture permeates the social order, it threatens to diminish the tension between market values and democratic values, such as justice; freedom; equality;

> respect for children; and the rights of citizens as equal, free human beings. Without such values, students are relegated to the role of economic calculating machines, and the growing disregard for public life is left unchecked.

Such students define democracy as "the freedom to buy and consume whatever they wish, without government intrusion" (Wright 182), a soberingly limited response. Schools built on corporate models do not promote responsible social action. Students at for-profit schools feel little sense of belonging to a larger community or obligations that come to members of communities. Instead, they focus on personal gain and individual achievement: "Education becomes less a force for social improvement than a force for commercial investment" (Giroux). As Bill Readings puts it in his critique of contemporary higher education, students come to see their relationship to the university somewhat like their relationship to their car dealer, and the process of gaining an education akin to the process of buying a new sedan (11). As John Sperling, the founder of the University of Phoenix described the purposes of his school, he pronounced, "I am not involved in social reform" (Traub 123). Neither are other players in the for-profit school arena, and neither are their students. For such students, "Citizenship is a recreational choice, an individual taste" (Ohmann, "Citizenship" 43).

Another risk of casting students as customers is that students begin to demand a comfortable and convenient education, one that provides a credential but does not ask students to put themselves out too much in the process. In an analysis of the market dynamics of first-year composition, Kristine Hansen points out that student-consumers are

> seeking and being offered a microwave version of education. They want to be done faster than ever in acquiring the diplomas and degrees that have become synonymous with credentials for participation in the professions. (244)

Student-consumers want less and less for their tuition dollars; and in an ironic swindle, student-consumers are often willing to pay most to schools who offer them the least in terms of learning.

Given current consumer culture in America, all schools need to market themselves to attract and satisfy student customers. But most schools, and especially most teaching and research faculty, see this need as a necessary evil, something to be monitored carefully to protect school integrity, and something to be discouraged whenever possible. In contrast, Hybrid U actively courted the students as customers, and the notion that they were customers who deserved to be satisfied emanated from the top management at Hybrid University. It was evident in the school catalog, marketing materials, faculty conversations, memos from the school founders, and school policies regarding academic work. This meant that in addition to owning the physical space, the students knew from the

beginning of the term that as their instructor I had to serve them well or get fired. And once I realized this, I also realized that my teaching writing at Hybrid U would also be much about *not* teaching writing.

Because Hybrid U students saw themselves as customers to be served, some of them struggled with the rhetorical concept that writing should address the needs of target audiences. Jennifer was a student who never managed to understand this. Jennifer saw Hybrid U as an opportunity for a fresh start in life; though she was only twenty years old, she was recently out of jail and on probation for some sort of drug and violence-related charges. I knew this because she wrote a letter to her judge during class, sent it to the classroom printer, then forgot to pick it up. Jennifer looked young and uncomplicated. But her experiences in my class ranged from the outrageous to the tragic—such as when she explained that her paper was late because she'd gotten pregnant by a classmate she barely knew and was having a miscarriage. She, of all students I have ever had, desperately needed to learn to consider her audiences and the content of her communications. I tried to contact Jennifer some time after I left Hybrid U, and I was told that she had dropped out. She was from another state and it's likely she has gone home. However, no one I talked to seemed to know where she is now, and my online attempts to find her failed.

One day Jennifer's class was discussing notions of audience and whether it was a sellout to try to write what a teacher wanted to hear. Jennifer responded that students at Hybrid didn't have to try to write for teachers because it's a "student-centered" school. She added, "We're not trying to please the teachers, they're trying to please us." One student challenged her comments, but other students around Jennifer seemed to be nodding in agreement with her.

Jennifer's comment astonished me, but she was right on the money in some ways: she was the customer, and I was there to meet her needs. Her comment reminded me of commentary from by Arthur Levine, then president of Teachers College at Columbia University, describing the new breed of college student:

> They wanted the kind of relationship with a college that they had with their bank, their supermarket, and their gas company. They say, "I want terrific service, I want quality control. Give me classes twenty-four hours a day, and give me in-class parking, if possible." These are students who want stripped-down classes. (Traub 116)

Hybrid University is the fulfillment of Levine's description.

Mark was another student that complained mightily that he wasn't being properly served if I asked him to actually learn anything. He complained about something every day he came to class. He objected to having an attendance policy, saying since he had paid for the class he should be able to choose whether to attend. Teachers are paid either way, he said; what do they care who shows

up? One day, in the middle of a class activity, he demanded to know, "When are we going to use this in real life?" His question amused me because it was a day we were working on Requirements Documents, the specific genre he would be writing in every future day of his life as a computer programmer. Another day he insisted that a reading assignment was too hard, even though it was a screen and a half long and I was giving him in-class time to do it. I did, at this point, say, "You've got to be kidding." He said he wasn't a good reader. I told him he'd get better as he read more for college.

Mark replied, "That won't happen here," and he explained that he didn't have to do any reading at Hybrid U, "like at a real college."

I asked, "You don't think this is a real college?"

He replied, "Not like other colleges that have you read a lot."

Mostly, though, Mark surfed on the internet during class. One time I asked him to turn off his computer, only to turn around and discover him playing games on his cell phone. He missed class repeatedly, saying he was busy sleeping or hung over. As unengaged as he was, I followed the directions I was given and "worked with him." In the end, Mark passed the class with a C, and I think it only added to his sense of entitlement at the school.

All schools have "bad" students; one rite of passage for writing teachers is to develop a horror story of their own to share in the graduate carrels or faculty lounge. But the Hybrid University stories are different, for two reasons. First, because the University itself spawned "bad" student behavior, with policies and promises that discouraged students from genuine engagement with their writing class, by telling them explicitly or implicitly through Company policy that general education was not important. We all went through the paces for appearance's sake, but in the end no one with any power at the school valued writing instruction enough to require students to learn to write. Second, the students rarely knew that they were being narcissistic or lazy because no one was allowed to point it out; the school philosophy was founded on a premise that students were paying customers who deserved to have their demands met, and therefore students continually made unreasonable demands.

Having students cast as customers also meant I was responsible for customer service in ways I had not experienced at traditional universities. For example, Leslie instructed me to send out reminder emails for all major assignments, in addition to announcing them in class, writing them in the printed syllabus, and posting them to the electronic repository of class documents. I actually got a complaint email from a student the first week of classes saying he hadn't attended class that Wednesday because I had failed to email him and let him know we were holding it! This was for a class scheduled in a traditional MWF 9:00 slot, and the student had received a printed course schedule two days before. I let Leslie know about his complaint, laughing to myself, only to be surprised by her response: Yes, it was my responsibility to enter my class on

each day's online master schedule so students would know to come. Ultimately, the student skipped class, but his complaining email meant the absence was overlooked, and I was sent scrambling to placate a disgruntled customer. As the term progressed, I found I was expected to remind students to come to class, warn them when their absences were excessive, remind them about regular writing assignments, and negotiate with them endlessly about due dates, requirements, and standards. Halfway through the term, I wrote the following in my notes:

> I have become a full-blown nag at [Hybrid U]. Email to remind students the paper is due in two days. Email to tell them I'll take it late with a penalty, just this once. Email to say I got it, but it's totally incomplete, you have until Sunday night to resubmit. I am rewriting the syllabus (simplifying!) and putting an end to this surveillance role I've somehow gotten talked into taking on—no more babysitting emails. I'm going to give them an updated list of due dates and leave it at that.

My desires to quit my customer service role, unfortunately, didn't end with my new resolve, and three weeks later, I wrote the following:

> I have not stopped the babysitting emails but increased them. I'm afraid to stop for fear that students are going to fail the class because they "didn't know" what was due when. This is absurd, but even though I think it's inappropriate for me to do, I can't stop: the admin will ask me what kind of contact I had with each student, and I may need the paper trail.

My role as customer service representative came to eclipse my role as writing instructor at Hybrid University. In my last weeks especially, I spent at least as much time managing student demands and answering student email as I did planning, teaching, and evaluating student writing. As customers, students learned that their demands would be satisfied. However, the student-as-customer root metaphor stripped students of opportunities to learn to judge and speak to audiences well. It made them self-centered, and it made them vulnerable, because they never quite gained a sense of what they didn't know, what they didn't think of to request, what they might have found painful but useful had the school valued their educations more than their immediate comfort and satisfaction.

Minding the Boss

As my time at Hybrid University went on, I came to discover that I had misplaced my loyalty and trust in Leslie, the dean of academics. She holds a PhD and had been a tenure track junior professor at a reputable traditional university. She loved teaching and

early on shared warm and pleasant stories about former students and teaching experiences. At first I considered her an ally, someone who would help the corporate powers understand the needs of teaching faculty and work as a buffer to protect academic freedom and integrity. Unfortunately, working for her eventually gave me a sense of the familiar when the new *Star Wars* movie depicted Darth Vader as a former good guy.

The role of an academic dean in a for-profit school is a tightrope act; Richard Ruch describes his own experience as an academic dean as typical in for-profit schools. The dean is "the bridge between the business side and the academic side," and Ruch asserts that "finding the right balance between the dual roles of academic leader and business manager responsible for making the numbers" is a dean's greatest challenge (114). Furthermore, while in a traditional university the academic dean is seen as a faculty member who "articulate[s] the shared vision of the faculty," in a for-profit setting a dean is likely to function as a supervisor accountable for making sure the faculty complies with business directives (114). Still, I felt betrayed by Leslie. I believed the corporate founders didn't know education from their elbows, but she did. Given her role as dean of Hybrid U, she set aside her knowledge of education to take on the corporate values of cost efficiency and clean operations, with "scalability" as her mantra.

Though Leslie initially hired me as a "faculty member," my official status was never quite clear. On the one hand, I was "faculty" enough to be asked to design and implement the writing program. I wrote the course description, researched and chose textbooks, designed the syllabus and all writing assignments, and created rubrics and other assessment tools for all student evaluation. At the beginning, Leslie talked openly about what an opportunity it was for me to carry out this intellectual work and how she saw a bright future for me as the school grew.

However, she soon made it clear that I was presumptuous to expect faculty perks. When she removed me from a faculty email discussion list, for example, I asked to be put back on. The list was the source of announcements and other notes of faculty interest, and it was also the site of lively conversation about what it meant to teach in such a new and innovative setting. "No," she said, "Since you're not full-time, you're an 'outsider' here, and you don't belong on the faculty listserv." She used the term "outsider" repeatedly. "If there's anything you need to know, I'll tell you," she said. The message I heard: "You're faculty when I want you to do faculty work, but other than that, expect to be treated like a second-tier employee." I had thought I was finally stepping up from GTA-adjunct serfdom to the professional-managerial class; instead, I found myself a living example of its ongoing disintegration (Ohmann *Politics of Knowledge* 95).

Another disappointment for me came when Leslie asked me to do some consultant work before my teaching term began, to find out how large effective writing classes could be. I had my own biases for small classes, but I did the work diligently, studying a

range of institutions. She asked me if my syllabus could accommodate larger class sizes—instead of 25–30 (already plenty large), could I teach 40–70 students per class? Leslie explained that I could assign much less writing than other schools typically did for a writing class; wouldn't that allow me to take on more students?

At first I told Leslie no college taught writing classes of that size, but we could try (Texas Tech and the University of Florida run large-lecture writing classes, but their contexts were so different as to be irrelevant, I thought). But then I called Leslie back. I wanted to make it clear that we couldn't increase class size without decreasing the instructional quality, not with the structures and resources we currently had planned. Leslie's response stunned me, and in the moment of silence after I spoke, I realized that I had misapprehended what consultants do. I wasn't to recommend a best course of action; I was to find data that justified what she already wanted to do. After a pause, Leslie told me that I needed to decide if I was a good fit for Hybrid U, and if not I should let her know so she could make her staffing plans. The message: "You are replaceable. Do what I want, or you're out of here." Especially at the beginning, I wanted to please Leslie. I wanted the administration to be happy with my work, to see me as a hardworking, innovative team player. But I also didn't want to do work that would be an embarrassment to my own education, experience, and values. I couldn't resolve this bind, and eventually I chose to leave the school because of it.

Teaching Writing

Despite feeling isolated and exploited, I had some good experiences while teaching at Hybrid U. Though the sections had initial enrollments of 32 and 23 students, by the time schedules were sorted out I had reasonable class sizes, 23 in Section A, the "enhanced" section, and 17 students in Section B, the "regular" section. I was relieved that despite my terrible conversations with Leslie about class size, in the end the school had limited the numbers on the rosters. Also, I was genuinely proud of the course I had designed, at least in the beginning. The course aimed to fulfill two sometimes disparate goals: the need to prepare students for immediate business writing and the desire to help students develop a sense of academic writing as a tool for inquiry and intellectual exploration. I was aware of the tension Leo Parascondola identifies between "write-to-earn" and "write-to-learn" rhetorics (209), and I hoped the Hybrid U context would allow me to find a balance between the two. Because the students were all computer science majors, and because they had such outstanding technological resources, I started by choosing an online reader to replace the traditional textbook. My classes used *Technology and Society: An Online Reader for Writers*, edited by Eric Crump and published only online by Bedford St. Martins. It's a lovely reader for tech-savvy students. Readings discussed social implications of new technology, internet spam, electronic piracy, computer viruses and

other issues students found compelling. Useful introductions preceded each reading, and reflection questions and suggestions for writing assignments followed them. My class also used a traditional handbook but with an interactive CD companion volume. These choices of texts, coupled with the school's system of handing in all assignments electronically, meant that my course was almost entirely paperless, with the exception of handouts I distributed both electronically and in print. This cutting-edge technology promised all sorts of new pedagogical possibilities.

I also felt proud of the course because I tied the course content closely to the Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition adopted by the Council of Writing Program Administrators in 2000, and at the same time I strived to design the course to help students meet their exigent needs for writing to and for business clients. One writing project that met these two goals was a "genre translation assignment" that asked students to adapt documents from one business genre to another. Specifically, students learned about purpose, audience, and genre and were then asked to "translate" Requirements Documents they had written in their computer science classes into executive summaries, information guides for nontechnical audiences, progress report memos, or other related business genres. The second part of the assignment asked students to write an essay reflecting on how their writing changed to suit various rhetorical contexts. I hoped students would learn the rhetorical skills taught in typical first-year composition classes, but because they were imbedded in a real rhetorical situation—students actually were needing to evaluate audiences, make rhetorical choices, and use language effectively to communicate about their current computer science projects—I hoped the lessons would be remembered, reinforced, and implemented in their writing beyond English class.

Though, in general, students weren't much interested in learning to write, they were deeply engaged in Geek Culture and eager to share it with me. I found Geek Culture and its trappings delightful throughout the term. Hybrid U was a place that allowed Geekness to be rehabilitated from a chronic social embarrassment into the ultimate hipness; students who had struggled as Geeks at the margins of social acceptability suddenly found themselves rising celebrities. The most fluent users/speakers of L33t—a sophisticated linguistic system developed by online gamers—had social cachet, for example, and the longer you had played EverQuest the cooler you were. I tapped into Geek energy as much as a could in the class. For example, the first week in the term, I showed a clip from <*www.homestarrunner.com*> of Strongbad, a Geek cult figure who answers off-the-wall email questions from fans. In this clip, called "English Paper," Strongbad gives writing advice with hilarious commentary, including such tips as triple space, cut and paste in a random illustration, and tape money to the last page for your teacher. This led into a productive conversation about writing strategies, myths, and what actually works for students—and led to one very audible gush, "You know Strongbad? You're my favorite professor ever!"

One particularly memorable activity for me was asking students to rewrite the story "The Three Bears" to suit specific audiences, purposes, or genre needs, which they drew out of a hat on slips of paper. It's a fine activity to introduce these rhetorical concepts, one I had used at other schools with other first-year writing classes. The texts the students produced at Hybrid U, however, were unprecedented. In part it was because they had laptops, software, and an LCD projector in the classroom; in part it was that Geeks love messy combinations of the visual, the aural, and the textual. The results were a scream. One group projected a three-bears version of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" on the big screen and had the class sing it with them ("Mama-Bear-ah, Mama Bear-ah, let me go!"). One flash animation took a local billboard celebrity—a buxom young barmaid advertising a locally famous microbrew—and programmed her into a dancing Goldilocks. There was also a formal police report, a threatening letter from a collections agency, and a business memo explaining a delay in a product launch because of bear interference. I left class with the students talking animatedly in the room, continuing the conversations about rhetorical elements long after I had gone.

These days were the teaching highlights of the term, and they seemed to me brief pools of light in which I saw clearly why I loved teaching so much. But this light dried up quickly as institutional pressures limited the teaching and learning that happened in my class. In end-of-the-term evaluations, students gave me the highest marks of any faculty member in any subject, full- or part-time, and I feel grateful that there were brief moments of insight and success in the course. Unfortunately, there were too few, and fewer as the term progressed.

Not Teaching Writing

Despite the hopeful start in my writing class, things went downhill quickly. One well-meaning student explained that computer science work always had to come first, and if that meant not doing English homework, that was all right. He meant no disrespect, and I knew he was conscientious about his studies. He believed this, though, because computer science faculty had told him it was true, and the administration in general backed it up. I found myself moving due dates and simplifying assignments to suit the deadline schedules of the programming classes. Then I found myself canceling whole sections of the syllabus because students complained that I was assigning homework. For example, I cancelled an assigned book review (which I had seen as an opportunity to practice summary, paraphrase, analysis, and response writing) when I learned that students had been assigned but not actually read the chosen book in their business class. I learned to plan class assuming that no one had read any out-of-class assignments. I ended up using whole class periods toward the end of the term as "writing workshops"—which was academic babysitting and would begin with my lame instructions: "Open up a new Word document and

type your name in the top left-hand corner." Students would write for the whole period—the sort of writing that always took place outside of class at other schools. Or they wouldn't write, and they would surf the web and IM their friends instead, knowing that there was no real consequence for not participating in class.

The most severe of revisions I made to the course, though, was canceling the final portfolio that I had intended as an exit exam. Three weeks before the end of the term, Anne, the dean's assistant, told me verbally that gen ed had been asked to "ramp down" classes. Despite my requests for clarification via email, she documented nothing in writing. When I found her in her office, she rolled her eyes and passed on the word apologetically: the powers that be felt that gen ed needed to take a back seat for finals because the computer science classes were really stressing students out.

I had originally planned to assign a portfolio as a final project, in which students would revise previously written papers. Only now I realized that students hadn't written many papers, and I couldn't ask them to do revision work outside of class. Furthermore, I was informed that the last two days of class were to be cancelled to allow for more time for the move to the new campus. This meant all instruction had to end two days early.

In the end I gave the most watered-down writing final I've ever given, asking the students six short answer questions and having them write a summary and response to a brief article that they'd read before and had copies of during the final. I made it deliberately easy, following instructions to "ramp down."

I spent the last weeks of the term distressed that my class was a sham. Many students had failed the class for nonattendance, but even those who showed up weren't learning much—I couldn't teach more than mini-lessons on discrete topics such as email etiquette because there was no way around the Hybrid U minimal-homework policy. As much as I wanted to be innovative and "think outside the box," as I had been instructed by administrators, I couldn't see a way to teach writing to students who wouldn't have time to practice writing. I had estimated that in a traditional university, this course would call for sixty to ninety hours of homework—two to three hours of work for each hour in class. In comparison, the Hybrid U homework agreement allowed me to assign about fifteen hours of homework over the course of the entire term—and the students understood this homework to be optional, not required. Furthermore, I learned in the first week of class that many of the students were ill-equipped to succeed in a college-level writing course and would have been placed in a remedial or preparatory course at a traditional university. Under-prepared students work more slowly than their more knowledgeable classmates, and they protested that the homework policy was a *time* limit, not tied to what they should actually be able to do in that time; if they couldn't finish an assignment in an allotted time, they shouldn't have to finish it. About a month before the term ended, I emailed my supervisors, both academic and corporate, to tell them how inadequate the course was turning out to be:

> …a typical reading load has averaged somewhere around three pages per week over the quarter. Even when reading assignments are as short as one and a half pages from sources such as CNN.com, students complain that it's too hard or too time consuming. Writing tasks are similarly streamlined. The total workload in [this class] is significantly lower than any comparable class for comparable credit I've taught at any school…For students with true learning difficulties, I have offered to meet with them personally or make arrangements for [tutoring]. I've also researched and listed community resources available. However, no students have taken me up on those offers except students who are already excelling.

Despite my concerns and detailed email, I received no reply. When I asked Anne, the dean's assistant, she told me not to expect a reply; the powers that be were busy "ramping up" for the upcoming term and the new crop of incoming students. And thus my course ended, not with a bang but a whimper, and certainly not having met even the minimal requirements of writing courses at any other school I had ever known.

When the Customer was Wrong

In my crippled attempts at appeasing the customers and the administration, I became a terrible teacher. One problem that should have been obvious, but was not, was that sometimes the customer was wrong. However, sometimes the customer was wrong because he was simply an inappropriate customer. Of the students I taught, many were well prepared and some thrived in the unique environment of Hybrid University. However, disturbing numbers of students were admitted to the school though they were clearly unqualified to do the work. In October 2004, a report from the U.S. Department of Education alleged a similar problem at the University of Phoenix, where marketing/admissions representatives claimed they were unduly pressured to put "asses in classes" regardless of student qualifications or ability (Blumenstyk). My experience at Hybrid University leads me to conclude that this in an inescapable consequence of combining education with money-making.

I had, for example, one student whom I'll call David. I'd say, "Read this excerpt, and we'll talk about it in a few minutes." David would look at me as if I had asked him to sing opera or translate Greek. He'd pull up the website and concentrate mightily, but he couldn't read, couldn't comprehend, and couldn't discuss even simple texts. Writing was even worse for David. The genre translation assignment was a debacle; he simply could not understand the instructions or grading criteria, and he submitted two unintelligible versions that bore no resemblance at all to the assignment. I knew David to be a well-meaning student; he made friends easily with students who helped him in his other coursework. But the fact was,

David couldn't read or write; he had already failed other classes at school and was well on his way to fail several others.

I went sleuthing to find out why David struggled so much, and what I found was that there was never any suggestion that he would ever do otherwise. David had earned a 13 on the ACT, which on today's scale is approximately a 5th percentile ranking; i.e., 95 students in 100 nationwide outscored him. David reported that he had passed Algebra I in high school but failed high school geometry. Before he was admitted to the school he had no computer science experience and no relevant work experience. The admissions representative had noted that he had no specific leadership skills and generally poor communication skills. Ten minutes into the term, I should have seen that this student never had a fighting chance in an accelerated computer science program.

But what was I to do, then, in a setting where he was the customer and the customer is always right? I tried to "work with" David, as I had "worked with" other struggling students. Anne, the dean's assistant, whispered in the hall to me that the school intended to kick him out at the end of the term—a decision made long before the term grades could be considered but after the deadline that put him on the hook for full tuition that term. In my class, David finished few of the assignments, read almost nothing, and failed the simplified final. The school did not end up kicking him out that term, and David managed to hang on until part way through his fourth term before he left the school. When he left, he had paid roughly $24,000 in tuition and gained no transferable college credit.

It turned out, the customer was often wrong in my composition class, in ways I couldn't foresee or aid. Some were simply too unprepared to complete assignments regardless of how much they tried, a fault I place squarely on the shoulders of the admissions reps in marketing who talked them into attending the school in the first place. Other students skipped class constantly, because of family or financial problems or work schedules. Some attended but never did the work, saying their study priorities were elsewhere. In the end, despite my concerted efforts to "work with" students, only about fifty-five percent of students originally enrolled in the course actually passed it. Those who failed will repeat it with another instructor in another term, paying another $6,000 for that ten-week term's course of study.

Corporate Metaphors and Managerial Philosophy

While I worked at Hybrid U, I was initially given access to an intranet, with an electronic repository of documents written by one of the school's founders, a man I'll call Conrad. He headed the pDev group and wrote prolifically about his philosophies of management, education, and leadership. One memo, called "Focus," sought to end a lively online debate among the faculty about the responsibilities of teachers and the duties of students. Several faculty members had questioned the wisdom of viewing students as

customers and had suggested that being "student centric" or "buyer centric" didn't have to mean letting the students run roughshod over the place. Conrad was asking now to halt the discussion. He said, with regard to planning curriculum,

> We can do this in many ways, but based on everything we know and have experienced, it will be done in a particular way. And to be very blunt, if you are not comfortable with this way of doing it, let me know, because we can not afford to squander resources on peripheral (to us) philosophies of education. It matters not what "is best." This is a "burn-the-ships-and-get-with-the-program" moment.

This memo, please note, was to the faculty of an accredited university. It said, "No more debate, certainly no critique; you are all required to do as you're told." The terms of my employment agreement came to mind, reminding me that faculty at Hybrid U were at-will employees, not a self-governing body with protections of tenure or academic freedom. Conrad continued this memo, emphasizing that this school was to be run like a competitive business above all else. He wrote to faculty,

> Forget about education for a while and just think of us as a startup with a value proposition, some assets, some customers (employers), some clients (students) and a plan. My endpoint being that if you are employed by BMW, it does not make much sense to argue for building a Lexus or Toyota competitor. You have to decide if you are sporty, luxurious or value, and stick to it.

Conrad's advice had unwittingly resonated with the worry Bill Readings voiced in his 1996 critique of higher education, *The University in Ruins*, which points to the terrible consequences of having students think going to school is like buying a car (11). Conrad ended the long memo with a list of action items, and last was this: "I'm not going to stop inflicting you (promise) until we are all completely aligned about who we are and where we need to go." Alignment meant unanimous agreement. Pedagogy was not something up for debate; faculty members were to hear the leaders and follow their words. Conrad made good on this promise. Within a few weeks, the firings began, and faculty not in agreement with Conrad's vision for the school were terminated and escorted out of the building within minutes of the announcements. Two full-time assistant professors were fired without notice; a third faculty member who also had status as a Company vice-president, was relieved of teaching duties and moved out but paid through his contract year. Conrad acknowledged the missing professors at the next "State of the Company" party. He addressed the faculty saying, "There are some people who did not agree with us. They are not with us….This is like a religion or a political party, and if you

don't agree you shouldn't be here." Conrad concluded this section of his speech by quoting the New Testament: "Every…house divided against itself shall not stand" (Matthew 12:25). This was Conrad's Company, and he demanded faculty obedience.

Conrad's treatment of faculty as fungible work units was shameful, but to me his corporate rhetoric was most distressing when he used it to describe students. In the final faculty meeting I attended, in July after I had already made the decision to leave the school, Conrad spoke about the incoming class, the third cohort, as "the first 'real' cohort." There were already two cohorts of students at the school, and Conrad assured the faculty and staff that the school "would take good care of the ones that are already here;" however, he added, "This is the version that we're throwing away." I had previously heard the first two cohorts of students referred to as "beta" or test versions for the school. Conrad concluded his presentation on curriculum revisions, using the language of startup tech companies: "This is the new release."

In addition to Conrad's continual corporate metaphors, I had to contend with Greta, the one-woman Human Resources Department, and her corporate incursions. Out of nowhere she would fly by in a lemon sweater chirping about the good morning. She rarely had answers to my questions about school policy, but enthusiastically reminded me, "We're all learning together here!" It seemed I was often in trouble with Greta because I failed to recognize corporate concerns when it came to teaching or student issues. One time, for example, I off-handedly asked Anne, the dean's assistant who also taught a gen ed class, if she thought a particular student had any violent tendencies. I should not have asked the question because I wasn't scared of the student; I was just curious because when I had emailed him about missing class he had sent a puzzling, snide response. Anne had told me yes, this student had threatened a roommate and had a known drinking problem. She then promptly reported my question to HR, and a couple days later I found myself in a meeting with Greta.

At first I didn't even know what I had been called in for—Greta had started talking scattershot about students, safety, the Columbine High School shootings, and Company liability. Then it dawned on me that I was being scolded. "You have a responsibility to report safety issues such as this to Human Resources," Greta told me firmly.

"I already emailed the dean and let her know," I replied. Her concern struck me as an overstepping into a student issue—why would I report student behavior or concerns to Corporate HR?

Greta made it clear. "If something happened, the school could be held liable if someone got hurt." All future concerns about students were to be reported in both academic and corporate channels, she stated. When I left Greta's office I understood that the school didn't much care about the student's well being. And they certainly didn't care about my personal safety. But it is a violation of Company policy to see a potential lawsuit and not sound the warning to the corporate powers that be.

Greta's worldview surprised me throughout the time I worked at Hybrid U, because as far as I could tell, it never did occur to her that she worked at a school and not a corporate startup. I learned from Greta that though there was no written academic freedom policy, I should never teach anything that might make students uncomfortable in any way because the school had a corporate zero-tolerance harassment policy. Specifically, I was encouraged not to talk about the war in Iraq or include readings that mentioned sex. I was asked to sign a noncompete agreement promising not to hire away other employees for one year after I left, a document I thought appropriate for software developers—but for teaching faculty? I was invited to nominate people for the "Trendsetter Award," an HR initiative that rewarded employees for "delivery on commitments to customers," "exceeding customer expectations," and "solving customer problems in an economically appropriate way." The school always functioned as a business in my experience there. Teaching faculty were employees—not faculty with academic freedom, opportunities for intellectual inquiry, or professional autonomy. The one-woman Human Resources Department was not just a thorn in my personal side, it was the reigning authority. I was required to answer to it for both administrative and teaching issues throughout my time at Hybrid U.

Hindsight

I quit teaching at Hybrid University because the reality could not fulfill the initial promise. I admit that I quit before the school had a chance to get settled; I know it takes years for a new school to get established. But the fact is, by the end of the second term my work made me want to throw up. The gorgeous corporate space of Hybrid University was a gorgeous lie, because, at least as far as my class was concerned, no one was learning—or could learn, despite my efforts—much of anything. I had come to realize that the product for sale was credentialing, not education, not the transformation that comes to a person's mind and soul when they spend extended time learning with others. The lovely space of Hybrid University simulated a corporate office, but it also only simulated a university, giving the impression but not the substance of higher education. I came in with great hope for the school, and I left six months later ashamed of how misplaced my hopes had been.

About a year after I left Hybrid U I talked to a student I had taught there, Aaron, and he gave me an update. Tuition was now $70,000 for incoming cohorts, he said, and students who had withdrawn had discovered that the local state university would accept none of their Hybrid U credits for transfer, not even computer science work. Aaron told me, "Most students who go here feel dissatisfied, but they have to stay because they've already spent so much money." He added that a couple of terms ago, the school required all the students to sign agreements to stay in residence the full ten terms, so even though he has enough credits to graduate now he can't, and he has to keep paying for three more terms. Tuition is a

now a flat fee of $6,000 per term for his cohort, regardless of how many credits a student takes. This means students don't have to take gen ed courses if they've taken them previously elsewhere—but they effectively pay for the courses anyway. Aaron added that graduation, now nine months away, holds its own unknowns. Despite the initial promises from the school, neither he nor his classmates have actually done any corporate externships or worked on genuine projects for real clients. His current "internship" is an egregious use of cheap student labor, in my opinion; he works for Hybrid U designing curriculum for future cohorts. Given that he is only on campus biding his time to fill the residency requirement, to me it amounts to indentured servitude. Aaron has no professional work in his much-promised portfolio, and he doesn't know if he'll be able to get a job when he is finished. He told me if I talked to anyone from his cohort, they would say, "I want to get my piece of paper, and I want to get out." And these are the survivors. Cohorts 1 and 2 have been merged, and of the seventy-eight original students, only twenty-five are left. Of those twenty-five, only fourteen—eighteen percent of those entering the first two cohorts—are on track to graduate without paying for extra terms and classes. A year later it seemed that Conrad was making good on his comment about the first two cohorts: "This is the version that we're throwing away."

The thing to remember about Hybrid U is that the operation is legit: the school holds proper state licenses, and it is fully accredited. It is backed by reputable, global technology companies and pumped full of millions of dollars in venture capital. Each term a new entering class is inducted, and enrollments continue to increase exponentially. This is no diploma mill in the Bahamas with a remaindered LaserWriter printing degrees; to all appearances, this is the future of postsecondary education.

On my last day, I carried out a box of personal belongings, elated to know I was never returning. The chrome elevator hissed shut, the doorman nodded goodbye. My shoes echoed on the black tile floor, and the revolving door spun behind me. I was gone. I knew they would replace me with someone less academic, more suitable to their corporate tastes, less worried about academic freedom or intellectual integrity. That instructor would be more compliant and cooperate better with the customers; after all, business is business. There are customers to be served, money to be made, and this vast and gaping space of for-profit education in which to do both.

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