Postsecondary akin to business: U of S prof

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SASKATOON (CJP) — Universities are failing their faculty and students by adopting a corporate model anathema to the goals of higher education, says University of Saskatchewan professor Howard Woodhouse.

Woodhouse's new book, Selling Out: Academic Freedom and the Corporate Market, is a scathing overview of the modern university.

"The regime of the market model of education has to come," Woodhouse said. "I don't think the imagination of students or faculty, in general, is engaged enough."

The steady decline in government funding since the 1980s has led universities to adopt a corporate model themselves, courting students like businesses court customers, Woodhouse, the professor of educational foundations said.

In Selling Out, Woodhouse describes the relationship between students and the university. The perception of students as clients has resulted in the now-widespread use of student evaluations as decisions such as awarding tenure, renewal of probation, promotion, and right of first refusal.

"Student evaluations of teaching used to indicate 'consumer satisfaction' rather than the extent to which learning has taken place, and they are an inaccurate measure of the quality of a professor's teaching," he said.

According to Woodhouse's research, neither students nor faculty believe in the effectiveness of student evaluations, despite their growing impact in administrative decisions.

Underfunding has also caused rising tuition costs and inflated class sizes. Students now perceive themselves as customers, coming to demand results.

"They say, 'I'm not getting what I paid for,'" Woodhouse said. "On the research side, Selling Out outlines a shift in emphasis toward projects with the potential to bring goods and services to market and away from curiosity-based research."

Government research dollars are increasingly tied to projects done in partnership with groups in the private sector who will offer to match funds, he said. This can rob the research autonomy of university researchers.

"They can set the goals and the nature of the research," he said of the private sector.

Research in the fields of the humanities and social sciences has been particularly affected — with less and less money for research in the sector, professors must spend more time dreaming up ways of convincing their current research to business applications rather than nurturing their imaginations, Woodhouse charged.

"How can I re-frame what I'm doing to make it related to business? How can I use my study of John Donne's poetry to improve the marketability of books?" the professor asked. "If it wasn't so ridiculous, it would be laughable."

Woodhouse has come out critically against the Canadian Light Source, whose radiation research takes place at the University of Saskatchewan. He fears that the Canadian Light Source project's synchrotron — a particle accelerator paid for largely with public funds — will be used by private corporations to withhold socially valuable discoveries from the public.

As another example, he notes the patent laws controlling intellectual property allow pharmaceutical companies to control new drug discoveries, inflating prices.

"The Canadian Institute for Health Information estimates that the per capita costs for prescription drugs across Canada have grown by 7.6 per cent, from $337 in 2001 to $629 in 2007," he writes in Selling Out.

Academic Freedom and the Corporate Market

HOWARD WOODHOUSE

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