MIT: community or corporation?

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The faculty, in this university-as-organization, lose many of their traditional prerogatives. No longer are they to be considered a source of independent authority within the university. Instead, they represent the professional staff levels of the corporation. They are, however, the trustees to provide certain services to the university's customers. Of course, that faculty are allowed to exercise a great deal of power within the university, but they are subject to the will of those who own the corporation. Through a system of policy and operating boards (faculty committees and executive), the trusted senior employees of the corporation are put to work at the tactical and administrative levels. The faculty become, at least technically, a group undifferentiated from the other employees of the corporation. In administration, although some, of course, earn greater influence through personal skills.

The market

Having assembled this large, and rather expensive enterprise, the question remains: "What do you do with it? Who are the customers of the university-as-corporation? At this point, most people would probably jump up with the answer "students," but the question is not really correct. For the university-as-corporation has a much wider marketplace in which to peddle its wares and services. For example, MIT, as a corporation, has a primary revenue stream that is not found at most universities: its students. In addition, there is always, as many critics of contemporary education have pointed out, society itself as a customer for education.

Students come to the university to buy what it has to sell: knowledge. They pay the university, under the guise of tuition, for a commodity, training. And, like any other business, the university charges what the market will bear; there is, therefore, an "additional cost" of a university education. No one would buy an education if the university were to charge the "true" price, one may suppose. One advantage to this view is that it clearly states that just where students fit into the so-called academic community: no longer is there any question about their membership in a hypothetical "community of scholars." Students come, money in hand, to buy education and, for the most part, they want what everyone else wants. They have the right of the consumer and no more; either to buy or not to buy; like anyone else, the university retains complete control of its products. To make matters worse for the student, he is part of the smallest and least informed of all the customers of the corporation. He is not likely to see theivers of the university described above, and it is even more unlikely that anyone who held this view would be eager to discuss it and publicly argue in its favor. It is, however, an interesting fact that it corresponds with social reality at several points and so should aid in efforts to understand and change the university. But this is another story.

Commercial and governmental interests who wish to use the university for their own ends, whether it be to sell textbooks, computer time, or patent information, also buy large amounts of money, and the university is probably more interested in money than education. For the university, as a business, the university caters to its customers, and the same marketplace in which students are buying knowledge also exists as a marketplace where other customers can satisfy their needs. The社会效益 is where the money comes from; for example, "Facts About MIT" reported in the 1969 Treasurer's report, MIT's total operating expense of $217,505,000, 18% of which was "sponsored research," the other category being "educational and general" expenses. The cost of "additional" customer knowledge has large amounts of money at the university. In its struggle to pay for itself, it not only has to decide how quickly it has to come to the university on the corporation-as. Like any business, the larger the corporation, the bigger the customer and the customer's. Financially, it is a very big customer, and the more it is interested, the more it will be to the interests of the corporation. For example, as in any other corporation, the corporation-as-university is trying to maximize profits, and, therefore, the corporation-as-university is trying to maximize the potential market. When the potential market is small, the corporation-as-university's biggest customers are those who are not interested in their products, in this case, the students. As the market grows, the corporation-as-university's biggest customers are those who are interested in their products, in this case, the students.

The university-as-corporation offers a very clear solution to this question, one which can be debated without being obscured by concepts which have been dragged out of the middle-ages.

The question of who has the right to run MIT, or any modern university, does not have a quick and simple answer. The development of the university from a medieval institution to a modern corporation has involved the incorporation of countless synergism, and contradictions, particularly concerning the role of faculty and students. The answer to the problem, it seems, must be somewhere between presidential autocracy and democracy. For the university-as-corporation's biggest customers are the students, and the students are the people who need the university. If the students are not interested, the university will not survive. If the students are interested, the university will survive. The society needs trained and educated students, and it is no wonder that the small consumer, the student, may feel his needs are being subordinated to those of society (which often seem counter to the student's needs and desires in education).

Fiction or fact?

The preceding discussion of how the university might be viewed has, quite honestly, been largely speculative - a sort of fictional essay. But, if the university is fiction, it is true in some sense and should serve as an aid in thinking about the university. It is unlikely that very many people have the view of the university described above, and it is even more unlikely that anyone who held this view would be eager to discuss it and publicly argue in its favor. It is, however, an interesting fact that it corresponds with social reality at several points and so should aid in efforts to understand and change the university. But this is another story.