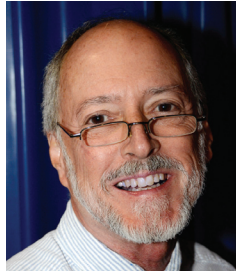


“Faculty will have the fight of their lives to defeat forces that want to substitute inferior commercial products for real faculty instruction”

A corporate takeover of the curriculum?

by Tom Auxter, President, United Faculty of Florida

THE 2013 LEGISLATURE passed a law (HB 7029) that starts the process of awarding credit at Florida’s universities and colleges for courses designed, taught, and graded by corporations. The goal is to replace accredited courses that universities and colleges now offer with courses provided for sale to students by commercial vendors.



Without active instruction by faculty and active learning by students, we will have graduates with nothing more to show from their experience than dated technical information sold to them by commercial vendors.

The bill specifies that “the Department of Education shall contract with a qualified contractor to review and provide recommendations for on-line courses, including massive open on-line courses and competency-based on-line courses for K-12 and postsecondary education.”

- » Any “individual, institution, entity, or organization” — both “public and nonpublic” — would be able to create a course and lobby to have it approved.
- » Once the law is implemented (2015) the power to grant accreditation for these courses would be given to a political appointee in Tallahassee.
- » The Commissioner of Education will decide which courses receive credit and can be sold to Florida college students and the Chancellor of the State University System will decide which

courses receive credit and can be sold to university students.

The original bill (SB 904), proposed by Sen. Jeff Brandes (R-22, Pinellas), was intended to “upend the American college accreditation system” as reported by Inside Higher Ed.¹ Indeed, the radical intentions were boldly stated in the bill’s title, “Florida Accredited Courses and Tests (FACTS) Initiative.”

Brandes thinks of knowledge as a commodity, and it makes sense to him to say it should be for sale. Brandes sarcastically says “the arguments against [SB 904] would be there’s something magical about how you attain that knowledge. For the most part, the knowledge is the commodity. So what we’re saying is, ‘How are we going to get this commodity into your head?’”

Brandes’ bill, which was folded into HB 7029, would:

- » institute a state accreditation system that bypasses the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accreditation process
- » wave the green flag for commercial vendors to open up shop in Florida
- » force universities and colleges to accept any credits approved by a political appointee in Tallahassee
- » invite commercial vendors to lobby to substitute their questionable, unproven on-line courses for the high quality on-line courses that faculty have already developed and
- » take away faculty involvement in and oversight of the curriculum.

Effect on commercial vendors

When commercial vendors replace on-line courses faculty now teach with courses designed by the

vendors, they stand to make windfall profits at the expense of student learning outcomes. The cost of producing an on-line course goes way down when faculty are eliminated. Vendors can simply pay someone once for lectures and use computer grading to test the students, who will be tempted to sign up for courses with slightly lower tuition and an easier workload.

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Effect on faculty and students

If lobbyists convince legislators to expand the vendor option, we could see any course with a large enrollment, and eventually any course in the curriculum, offered for credit and for sale in Florida.

If we allow this corporate takeover of the curriculum, we will lose the high quality courses faculty teach now. We will lose the (mostly) blended or hybrid courses we have now where faculty interact with students every week — fielding questions, getting a sense of how to adapt the course to student learning as it occurs, and giving orientation about what to expect next. A college education is not a skill set defined by those who have something to sell on-line. It takes real faculty interacting with students to challenge them and deal with student learning problems on the spot — individually and effectively. Each

course is a guided process in which students acquire a way of viewing the world and a way of learning. If we accept the vendor model of passive learning, which means students digest information presented to them and repeat back information on computer-graded tests to prove they have a “commodity” in their heads, we will lose a whole generation of students.

Effect on Florida’s economy

Without active instruction by faculty and active learning by students, we will have graduates with nothing more to show from their experience than dated technical information sold to them by commercial vendors. They will have graduated without the ability to learn in a rapidly changing world -- to think critically, integrate different areas of knowledge, solve problems in creative ways, and communicate carefully reflecting a multi-sided view of the world. Graduates will have to be re-educated, employers will be faced with hiring graduates who are not prepared for the future, and Florida’s economy will stagnate.

Faculty will have the fight of their lives to defeat forces that want to substitute inferior commercial products for real faculty instruction. Join us in the struggle to defend the quality of what we do for students and for the future of Florida. We will be successful only when we band together to defend the integrity of the profession. **FEA**

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¹ Ry Rivard, “Taking on Accreditors and Faculty,” *Inside Higher Ed*, April 11, 2013.