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Interview with Manzar Foroohar

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Professor Manzar Foroohar

INTERVIEW WITH MANZAR FOROOHAR

Professor of History & California Faculty
Association President, Cal Poly chapter

Nishan Havandjian

NH: Is your position as CFA president the main reason for your interest in the corporate university?

MF: I am also a faculty member, and I am concerned about the future of the university. I believe the influence of big corporations is going to have a major impact on our future.

NH: What do you mean by that?

MF: We are a public institution of higher education. We are supposed to be serving the public as such. When a corporation donates to the university and has demands, or the money comes with strings attached, there is always a possibility of conflict of interest. The interest of corporations are not necessarily the same as the public interest.

NH: Do all donations really come with strings attached to them?

MF: I believe they usually come with strings. Of course, if corporations want to help public education with no strings attached, they are more than welcome to do so.

NH: Do you have examples in which the strings hurt the public because they were designed more for corporate well-being and not public interest?

MF: The relationship we have with PeopleSoft Incorporated. The Chief Technology Officer and Senior Vice President of PeopleSoft Inc. is a member of President Baker's cabinet. This is at a time that we have all sorts of problems with cms (Common Management System/PeopleSoft). I don't think this is a healthy relationship. We also know from last year's legislative audit of cms, that one of csu's vice chancellors, who negotiated the contract between csu and PeopleSoft, was a consultant for the company and was paid by them. This is a major conflict of interest issue. Corporations have no business influencing the policies of the university. This should be left to the csu administration and the faculty.

NH: A corporate donor may ask, "What's in this for me?"

MF: The corporations need educated employees, and that is what we do; educating our students for the future of the state and the country. We're training the future workers of these corporations.

NH: What specific examples do you have of corporate interference in academic matters?

MF: We have seen a lot of signs of it. For example at the newly-formed Channel Islands campus, corporations are involved in a major way in the affairs of the university. When the Channel Islands campus hires a new faculty member, one of the meetings arranged for the candidate is a meeting with so-called community members, most of them representatives of corporations. They have no voting rights in the final selection of the candidate, but they do interview informally and consult with those who do vote.

NH: Stanford has a guide for corporations who want to collaborate with the university. Is this a good idea?

MF: I haven't seen it. It is not a bad idea as long as it emphasizes the independence of the university.

NH: There is an editorial in the UCSD student newspaper in which they decry corporate influence on their education, which has reduced their education to the formula of hands-on work in order to land jobs. Have we reduced education to basic job training?

MF: The role of a public university is not just training workers for corporations, but also educating good citizens for the state, country, and the world. If we don't have a strong general education program, students won't get a comprehensive education. This is not to the benefit of the public. Students should be educated in every aspect of life, not just job training.

NH: Boise State engineering saw its budget augmented by \$35 million corporate donations. In these lean times, how could universities not be flexible?

MF: The problem is in not accepting corporate funds, but rather in the kind of relationship the university establishes with these corporations. Universities should have educational programs educating corporations about how their donations will be accepted and how important it is for the university to remain independent. Only an independent university can protect academic freedom and freedom of research and teaching.

NH: Where does liberal arts stand in the scheme of things?

MF: A strong liberal arts program educates students about social, economic, and political issues. It promotes understanding of humanity and human values. It is the essence of any university education.

NH: What manifestations of the corporate university do you see on the CSU level?

MF: If you look at CSU management, we have a lot of vice/assistant/deputy chancellors and other management cadres. A lot of these managers have corporate instead of academic backgrounds. The chancellor's office is increasingly establishing a business model of management. They are more concerned with how many students we graduate each year than with the quality of education.

NH: Would you then say they have an obsession with efficiency?

MF: Exactly.

NH: How would you assess corporate influence at Cal Poly?

MF: Large corporations have less apparent influence here. But we have a lot of money coming in to the technical departments, so the influence may be gradually increasing. Unlike Los Angeles and San Diego, we don't have signs for Burger King, Taco Bell, or other businesses on campus. But we do have our own corporate issues.

For example, UNOCAL has given large donations to Cal Poly. As faculty, most of us know about UNOCAL's environmental policy, or the lack of it. When we accept a grant from a corporation, does that make us more reluctant to talk about the nature of that corporation? Do we teach all we know about that corporation? Or do we just present it as another philanthropic entity?

NH: How much is the campus community aware about the dangers of corporate university?

MF: Unfortunately, I have not found much awareness among the students and faculty.

NH: Has CFA done anything about educating the campus about this issue?

MF: Unfortunately again, we've been too busy with other issues concerning working conditions and faculty rights. We haven't done our share of educating the community about the potential problems caused by corporate influence on public education. ☹