

9-1-2003

Interview with Kristina Downer

Jennifer Nemecek
California Polytechnic State University - San Luis Obispo

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Recommended Citation

Nemecek, Jennifer (2003) "Interview with Kristina Downer," *Moebius*: Vol. 1: Iss. 3, Article 14.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/moebius/vol1/iss3/14>

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Kristina Downer

INTERVIEW WITH KRISTINA DOWNER

Social Science Student &
Progressive Student Alliance member

Jennifer Nemecek

JN: What do you think of when you think of a “university”? That is, what is its purpose?

KD: I think of a university as a learning institution. The purpose of a university is not for students simply to gain knowledge, but to gain a passion for learning. I think that it is really important that this distinction be more widely recognized and understood by students.

JN: Why should students attend a university?

KD: Typically, students attend a university because they want to get a degree in order to prepare for a career. Ideally, however, students should attend a university not only to gain knowledge, but also to learn and understand as well.

JN: What should be the purpose of the faculty?

KD: The purpose of the faculty should be to create in students a passion for learning, not just an interest in passing a class or obtaining a degree. However, it seems that for whatever reason, faculty members are becoming just as disinterested in the true value of learning as students are. Perhaps this is due to a cycle of apathy and misunderstanding between students and faculty; if students aren't interested in the class, then maybe the teacher isn't interested in giving out good grades; alternately, if the teacher isn't interested and enthusiastic about the subject matter of the class, then perhaps the students aren't interested in participating and learning.

It seems increasingly apparent that the Cal Poly faculty is held in a position in which they must meet certain bureaucratic-like guidelines. For example, many classes must be graded with a curve in which half the class will receive above a “C,” the rest below. Another issue of concern is the credentials that are preferred or even required by many departments at Cal Poly. In my opinion, a professor doesn't earn credibility simply by having a Ph.D., but by getting as many students as possible to be successful in the class. For example, in the Social Science department, one of the best teachers I ever had was not rehired for the next quarter simply because he did not have a Ph.D., yet he was very successful in engaging the class in the material and pushing them to not only learn, but also to understand, the material. In other words, faculty should not necessarily be

judged on whether they have a Ph.D., but rather on their teaching abilities and the extent to which they can motivate their students to learn and not just regurgitate facts.

JN: What should be the purpose of the administration?

KD: The purpose of the administration should undoubtedly be to facilitate an environment in which students can be successful in learning. It seems that the administration has lost sight of the ultimate goal of a university—education. Now the main goal of the administration is to grow, build, and make more money; when in fact, it is the students that ultimately matter. Of course it's good to grow because we want more students to come to our university and get an education, but it is detrimental to our university if we don't grow in a sustainable manner.

The administration seems to put out this image that Cal Poly is a diverse, sustainable, environmentally friendly institution, when in fact, that couldn't be further from the truth. I am losing my respect and tolerance for the irresponsible and immoral actions on the part of the administration, and I think many other people would agree.

JN: What values should be primary in a university education?

KD: The primary value in a university education should be a desire to learn. Unfortunately, it seems that students are losing sight of that value and are instead simply trying to gain a degree. A lot of times students are more concerned with what time their class is offered or how difficult the teacher will be instead of the quality of instruction.

I also think that diversity, tolerance, and sustainability should be taught through education. David Orr, a professor and chair of Environmental Studies at Oberlin College, emphasizes the fact that all disciplines of education—sociology, engineering, biology, and architecture, for example, are ultimately related and dependent upon one another. Our education here at Cal Poly should be interdisciplinary.

JN: What do you think of when you think of a “corporation”? That is, what is its purpose?

KD: Corporate leaders claim that their purpose is to provide quality products and services that are useful to society while creating jobs and elevating the general standard of living. However, the true purpose of a corporation is simply to make a profit, usually regardless of the consequences.

Due to the extreme monopolization of corporations in the past few years, I think corporations are a huge threat to not only our uniqueness and individuality, but also to our freedom. Our freedoms are at stake, for example, when agencies like the FCC are basically succumbing to the demands of corporations—when the majority of the media is owned and controlled by a handful of corporations. We have become increasingly fed lies by the media—why else would most rational Americans buy into a “war on terror”?

JN: Why do people work for a corporation?

KD: I think that the people in power in a corporation are there not just to make money, but lots of money. The rest of the corporation's employees, the majority in most cases, are usually working simply to make ends meet—to have a job to support their families. They don't have the privilege or opportunity to request that their income be increased, because if they complain they could easily be fired and replaced with people who are willing to tolerate working for these organizations.

JN: What values are primary in a corporation?

KD: Contrary to what corporate leaders might claim, the primary value is money—not people, not the environment, and especially not the future. Nowadays, corporate leaders are so obsessed with making money that they are willing to exploit their workers from all over the world, as well as freely pollute the environment. They have absolutely no concern, or at least interest, for the generations to come. While I don't think that all of the people who run or work for corporations are bad people, I do think that corporations have solely become concerned with success, and success only. Unless corporations shift their priorities so that they can make a profit while emphasizing genuine concern for their employees and the environment, I will continue to have very little respect for them.

JN: What are the similarities between your answers to Questions 1 and 2?

KD: Ideally, a corporation and a university are fundamentally different. One is an organization or company, bringing people together in a structured manner in order to make a profit; the other is an institution, bringing people together for the purpose of learning. However, because universities are becoming more and more corporate due to their dependency on corporate funding, universities are spitting out degrees like Nike spits out shoes. Corporations have increasing influence on universities because CEOs and other people of power are sitting on our Board of Directors, or advising out departments, or funding our events. They are controlling everything from some of the research we conduct to the type of soda we drink on campus.

JN: Does Cal Poly represent, on balance, more of a traditional university or more of a “corporate university,” in your view? Is this, from your point of view, a “good thing” for the students who attend Cal Poly or not a “good thing”? Why?

KD: I think all universities are becoming increasingly corporate. Cal Poly is not an exception. We are becoming more dependent on corporate funding. So now some of our research, for example, is being carried out for the benefit of corporations. Cal Poly has become obligated to tailor itself to the expectations of the corporations that provide funding. The public institutions in California should be getting the majority of their

funding from the government and private, non-corporate, donations. We should be demanding this money for our schools, instead of wasting it away on frivolous elections and wars. We should not be accepting corporate donations with strings attached. Some people, namely those who are in power at the university but are nonetheless succumbing to the demands of corporations, may claim that we need these “harmless” donations from corporations in order to be a successful institution. Well, I pity these people, because they are not only ruining our education, but they are perpetuating the sick dominance of these profit-seeking, environment-destroying, people-oppressing organizations: namely, corporations. 