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Sections

- Home/Top Stories
- AP Video
- Business
- Gazette Charities
- News
- Opinion
 - Dawn Miller
 - James A. Haught
 - Readers' voice
- Columnists
- Comics
- Entertainment
- Food & Dining
- Home & Style
- Multimedia
- Series
- Weekend columnists
- Games
- Obituaries
- Outdoors
- Travel Guide
- Prep Sports
- APNews
- Plugged In
- Public records
- Sports
- Weather

Extras

- Mungs
- The Gazette Forums
- Health
- FlipSide
- Saturday Gazette-Mail
- Sunday Gazette-Mail
- Alliance Newsletter

Features

- Today's front page
- Library Archives
- School Closings

May 18, 2007

Cheyenna Weber

■ **Education quality more important than marketing**

WHEN faculty and the Board of Governors sparred recently over the appointment of Morgantown lawyer Mike Garrison as president of West Virginia University, many saw it as a fight for the guiding principles of the school. At stake is whether WVU will act as a corporation or an educational institution.

During David Hardesty's 12-year reign, WVU operated as a corporation, overly concerned with marketing, brand management and increasing cash flow. Many, including the faculty, argue the school has lost sight of its founding principles to serve the educational needs of West Virginians. As a WVU alumna who has experienced Hardesty's "student-centered" approach firsthand, I have to agree.

Critics tend to make a fuss over Hardesty's efforts to increase enrollment. This expansion has come at the expense of academics and student well-being and has less to do with Hardesty than with national demographics. WVU enrollment merely reflects a national trend. Schools across the country have been experiencing record numbers since the late 1990s, and next year the largest class of high school seniors in U.S. history will graduate. In the rush to become a competitive candidate in the global marketplace, more students are heading to college.

And it may not be such a good thing. Everyone seems to think increasing enrollment is best, and from a marketing and fundraising perspective it is; but to current and incoming students, it isn't quite so rosy. Throughout the past decade WVU was without enough housing and many freshmen were forced into hotels or private dorms. Class sizes grew and the university relied on more part-time, non-tenured, and graduate faculty to run enough required courses. Throughout this expansion, the school raised tuition several times, supposedly to increase pay for faculty and to build housing. Hardesty spent millions on a student recreation center and a new alumni center, partly to attract new out-of-state students. But for many current students and alumni, treadmills and cushy alumni center couches aren't enough to justify the falling quality of instruction. It isn't just larger classes and less experienced instructors, it also affects reputation. Any law school students will tell you that when WVU fell in rankings to the fourth tier, it directly affected the value of their degrees. The new WVU leadership must reevaluate the effects of expansion on academics and eschew marketing gimmicks in favor of increasing the quality of education. More tuition money doesn't necessarily mean a better university.

My main concern with David Hardesty has always been his focus on WVU as a corporation rather than an educational institution. His latest decision to join the board of CONSOL and his contention that this is not a conflict of interest is hardly a surprise.

Following another national trend, corporations have come to bear increasing influence at WVU. The school maintains an exclusive licensing agreement with Coca-Cola, despite student and faculty protest at the company's use of paramilitaries to murder and harass union leaders in Columbia. The WVU bookstore is no longer run by the university, but instead operated by Barnes and Noble, which has little financial incentive to stock less expensive used books to help ease student costs. Corporations have even extended to the Mountainlair food court, where fast food companies, notorious for paying workers substandard wages and peddling unhealthy products, vie for lucrative contracts. And this is just the little stuff. I won't even get into the enormous waste of resources WVU spends every year protecting its logo from copyright infringement, (even on student Web sites), or the role of corporate funding on the kinds of research the school conducts.

Perhaps even more galling has been Hardesty's attempts to protect the WVU brand by stifling student and faculty dissent. A prime example is the Free Speech Zones controversy. This policy restricted free speech activities to small areas well out of earshot from most students, administrators and faculty and was selectively enforced. It took a lawsuit from the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (www.fire.org) on

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behalf of students and some brand-damaging adverse media attention (including coverage of a "funeral" for free speech on campus), before Hardesty finally rescinded the policy and stopped wasting WVU resources reinterpreting the U.S. Constitution.

Even Hardesty's much-vaunted effort to combat partying, "WVUp All Night" appears to be little more than a PR stunt. Up All Night provides free food and activities for students as an alternative to downtown bars and has been hailed as an innovative way to promote wholesome fun and combat binge drinking. In fact, Up All Night is little more than a free food fest that attracts the already drunk and stoned after they've imbibed elsewhere. Grant Avenue parties and downtown bars continue to rake it in, many offering Ladies Nights to attract crowds of girls whose IDs are seldom legal. The link between underage consumption downtown and sexual assault and rape, much of which occurs back on campus, is well documented. WVU isn't the only school with this problem, of course, but the issue requires leadership, creative solutions, and commitment, not just free hot dogs and weakly attended workshops on date rape and binge drinking. Rather than lead a hard-nosed charge against underage consumption by using the power of the president's office to go after the establishments that promote it, Hardesty instead devised an image-friendly alternative that in fact does little but quell the munchies of under-the-influence underage students.

David Hardesty's tenure has been too focused on WVU the corporation and brand to the detriment of student well-being and academics. His policies have resulted in a diminished educational experience which is more expensive and unsafe than ever. The school was never intended to turn a profit, although that would be wonderful, and it should hardly be in the business of producing "lifestyle" brands and consumer goods. WVU can best enhance its brand image not by clever licensing and marketing campaigns but rather by addressing student and faculty needs. This would improve student life and make a WVU degree more valuable. This would be a sound business policy, reaching well beyond Hardesty's short-sighted policies which denied major problems and stifled dissent. Let's hope the new administration will openly address the challenges facing the school and return the focus from corporate policy back to where it belongs: educating West Virginia's students.

Weber, a WVU graduate, lives in New York, N.Y.

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