Business Metaphor Still Ascendant
By Dan Berrett
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BOSTON -- It was difficult to escape the conclusion, during the American Historical Association’s annual meeting here over the weekend, that higher education is in the throes of a crisis. Panels used the word “crisis” to describe the state of the job market for historians, the state of public universities, and the state of higher education in general. And the enemy was consistently identified as the ideology and analytical tools of business.

For example, the scarcity of faculty jobs in history -- 569 this year, which marked the smallest number in two decades -- was driven by more than simple laws of supply and demand, argued Martin Mulford, a self-described “rogue scholar” and former businessman, during a Saturday session, “The Academic Job Market: Finding Solutions in a Time of Crisis.” The lack of history jobs has been hastened and worsened by a larger trend of hiring adjuncts and contingent faculty instead of full-time faculty in the interest of cost-cutting, he said. This reflects a larger transformation of the role of business in higher education, which he likened to the shift from being a stepchild to the head of a household. “This is a problem of the colonization of the academy by business,” said Mulford.

Gerald Zahavi, a professor of history at the State University of New York at Albany, made similar critiques the day before, during a session dedicated to the ranking and assessment of history departments. He lamented the closure of programs, such as the announced elimination of three foreign language, classics and theater departments at his institution, as business-driven decisions instead of pedagogical ones. “This is all part and parcel of the erosion of the liberal arts college,” he said, adding that universities around the world were “under siege” because of bottom-line thinking. “This is a war we’re fighting,” he said.

Some expressed the belief that a business-driven mindset in the academy is also reflected in the purpose that higher education is thought to serve. It is no longer a place for students to be challenged, broadened, or taught how to think rigorously -- a place for the cultivation of knowledge for its own sake. The university has become a training institute for corporations and a means to get a good job, said Zahavi. Nowhere is this more evident than in the description of students as customers, many noted.

But some on the panels and in their respective audiences pointed out that this division between academics and administrators is too simple. Administrators are not simply bean-counters looking to feather their nests at the expense of academics, as some panelists suggested. They cope with a different set of pressures, such as how to maintain an academic program amid rounds of budget cuts.

“We don’t wake up every day thinking, ‘How are we going to stick it to the humanities?’ ” Todd A. Diacon, deputy chancellor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, said from the audience of the session on the job market. “We have to face a very different reality.” Like many other panelists and audience members, Diacon also noted that the “either/or” construct of academics and administrators ignores certain realities. Many administrators and others who are trying to measure productivity and maximize efficiency in higher education are -- like Diacon, a historian who has published books on early 20th century Brazil -- trained scholars. “The enemy is us,” he said.
Others noted that the real enemy was a larger question about the economic viability of higher education. Timothy J. Gilfoyle, who teaches American and urban history at Loyola University Chicago and led the department during a college effort to quantify faculty productivity, described an “elephant in the room”: the underlying economic model for undergraduate education in many institutions, which recognizes faculty members for their research and rewards them as they move up the ladder by giving them less and less contact with students. “How long can we sustain this economic model?” Gilfoyle asked.

Similarly, Diacon pointed out that the number of doctorate-granting history departments in the country -- about 160, according to Robert B. Townsend of the American Historical Association -- is also not sustainable because faculty in these programs often carry light teaching loads, with the extra classes transferred to graduate students and adjuncts.

Given this dynamic, it is "immoral," said Teofilo Ruiz of the University of California at Los Angeles, to keep accepting history graduate students into programs when only about one in four ever get the tenure-track jobs for which they are trained, according to Townsend's estimates. The remainder either find jobs outside the academy, leave before finishing, or are hired as adjuncts and part-time faculty at what Ruiz described as a "miserable, exploitative salary."

But quantitative, hard-nosed measurements -- which can be plucked from business practices -- are not inherently bad, either, said several panelists. Evaluating student learning in a deliberate and systematic way helped Oberlin College spot weaknesses in its program, said Carol S. Lasser, who has written on women and gender in 19th-century America. As a result of this evaluation, faculty members have started calling on students to expand their use of primary and secondary source documents and to make oral presentations more frequently. "Assessment can be your friend," she said. As she grew more familiar with the tools and mind-set that are used in such analyses, Lasser began consulting with accrediting agencies, who she thought needed the perspective of historians and liberal arts colleges. After all, the trend in higher education is toward more measurement, not less, she said.

At the same time, it can be too tempting to place too much faith in simple quantifiable metrics, warned Earl Lewis, provost of Emory University, a scholar of African-American history, and a member of the advisory committee of the National Research Council, which recently ranked doctoral programs. While such numbers can be statistically sophisticated, they can also offer "spurious precision,” Lewis said.

He and others observed how difficult it can be to quantify scholarly productivity when not all books or journal articles are equal in impact or influence. Measurements must be connected to a larger, core purpose if they are to mean anything. “Sometimes, they lead us to do things that don’t make any sense,” he said. For example, scholars and department heads can quickly figure out how to game a system, and boost their rankings on the NRC by, say, asking their professors to send out more external grant proposals.

One solution to the growing tension between academic and business interests, said many panelists, was for historians and other academics to use the tools of business to their advantage. These tools may take the form of marketing. Boosting interest in the subject among the general public -- from those interested in learning more about the historical and political moment in which the country finds itself to those charting their own genealogy -- can eventually increase demand for historians and their work, some said.
Scholars could also co-opt business techniques by learning the tactics. Mulford advised historians and others to learn the language of negotiation so that department heads can more effectively bring resources into their programs. One place to start, as the discussion on the ranking and assessment panel revealed, was to use business's analytical tools to measure productivity, teaching effectiveness, and facets of their work that matter to the academics. “Unless we come up with a way” to measure, said Gilfoyle, “someone else -- dare I say a bean-counter -- will do it.”