

LETTERS

THE EDITOR :

The piece by Albert Bermel in T50 is a moving and incisive account of what must have been a traumatic confrontation at Columbia. Although I know that theatre program only by reputation, I am convinced that its demise is a serious loss to the theatre and to the educational community at large, and TDR is right to document this loss while it is fresh in the minds of those most immediately affected.

Professor Bermel makes a number of penetrating observations about attitudes toward education at Columbia, and makes them so tellingly and effectively that they deserve to be widely pondered both by educators and by administrators. I could not shake off a sense of naiveté about many of Professor Bermel's remarks, however—as though he believed that the shameful events of Columbia's loss were occurring for the first time or that theatre was the only area presently under attack. Where has Professor Bermel been during the last five years? Where was he when the Tulane program went under a few years ago and TDR itself had to find a new home? Where has he been while Yale, Princeton, Harvard, and hundreds of less prestigious private colleges across the nation have been tightening their financial belts and, in the process, squeezing out academic programs of every description?

Probably I am being unfair to Professor Bermel; the naiveté to which I refer is implied rather than stated, and his objective was to describe events at Columbia rather than to discuss higher education nationwide, but it is high time that more of us faced the



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fact that the sad events at Columbia are symptomatic of a problem that faces all of us. It faces theatre educators because we continue somehow to inhabit one of those "fringe areas" that can easily be cut when the economic going gets rough; it faces the educational community at large, however, in a very real and direct sense, for if we cannot find means by which to define academic priorities and goals in ways which the businessmen on boards of trustees can understand, the ax will continue to fall as capriciously as it recently has.

The continued sluggish economy, reduced support from the government, backlash from violent student confrontations, alumni whose interest is focused primarily on athletic accomplishments—these are facts of life that are reflected in the balance sheets of private universities whether we like it or not. To call for continued deficit financing is to ignore the simple arithmetic of the way private institutions (as opposed to government-financed ones) must operate. Somehow we, the educators, must learn to live with the economic facts of life, and at the same time trustees must learn, as Professor Bermel correctly points out, that a college is not simply a business. But do we ourselves know what education is about?

The administration of the college where I am employed is seemingly more enlightened than many. Theatre has gained enough status to warrant at least the construction of a temporary building when the permanent facility we had been promised was set aside in favor of a physical education building. The theatre faculty has been expanded. At the same time, however, other academic programs are under attack, and I would be foolish indeed if I did not perceive that, unless the economic outlook dramatically reverses, somewhere an ax will be sharpened for me.

If I meet this challenge simply by

protecting my own program, I may or may not succeed, depending in part on my own skill at power politics. What is more important, however, is that the larger community of educators awake to the true nature of the emergency facing us. Until and unless we can define educational goals and priorities in such a way as to lead rather than to follow the vagaries of public opinion, we will continue to fall victim to the inexorable balance sheet and to the lowest common denominator of Philistine taste. There is plenty of blame and responsibility to go around, but we had better accept our share while we still have a choice.

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