



## ON THE BEAT

A Former Higher Education Reporter Reflects on Coverage

*Jon Marcus*

**W**hen colleges and universities finally responded this fall to the decade of complaints about their escalating costs, it wasn't by explaining why tuition has consistently increased at double the rate of inflation or by outlining the measures they were taking to save money.

No, the higher education honchos, in their wisdom, launched a campaign to explain how, with the right combination of loans and savings, a family could still afford the \$120,000-plus price of an undergraduate degree from a private, four-year college or university.

This could, of course, be seen as an outrageously condescending tactic serving only to prove the widely held belief that academia remains completely out of touch with an increasingly hostile public. But I see it as a commentary on education journalism.

After all, the colleges figured they could get away with it. And in many newspapers, magazines, television broadcasts and wire services, they did. That's because American journalists in general—and education writers in particular—have become unquestioning stenographers whose reporting, to twist an old cliché, is 24 hours wide and 10 seconds deep.

Most Americans would probably agree that journalism is in crisis, an intrusive and celebrity-centric perversion of an age when ink-stained wretches worked to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Where I depart is to suggest

that higher education coverage in particular should be more, not less, questioning and critical. In other words, higher education coverage leaves a lot to be desired not because it's too tough, but because it isn't tough enough.

Many editors seem to read "education beat" as "training ground for new reporters." Few people want the job, and most get out of it before they learn the difference between FTE and headcount, with the connivance of news organizations that pay too little attention to the topic. The education beat has an indisputably high turnover rate—even in New England where higher education is a major industry.

And make no mistake: higher education *is* an industry. It is no coincidence that some of the best higher education coverage in New England and elsewhere appears in business publications. As much as colleges and universities resist the idea that they offer a consumer product, the ones that do well on those annual magazine rankings send out reprints to reporters, donors and prospective students—much the way advertisers sell soap.

The lack of an investigative tradition among education writers stems in part from the fact that higher education once was viewed as largely sacrosanct and incorruptible. Academia's moral high ground gave way slowly, but the ultimate collapse might be traced to the day the former president of Stanford University was caught using taxpayer money to throw parties and redecorate a yacht. Before that time, few papers ran stories critical of such things as administrative bloat, high presidential salaries and tenured faculty who teach only about 28 weeks a year.

Still, too few media outlets pursue these angles. It took years before most higher education writers went beyond the news releases and dared to pose the questions: *Why exactly*

*does tuition increase every year at double the rate of inflation? Exactly what component of a higher education has increased in price at double the rate of inflation?*

Even today, too many reporters and editors readily accept the explanation they get from colleges and universities, which goes something like this: *Everything just costs more.* Or, *There still are affordable community colleges.* Or this year, *If you save all your disposable income and work two jobs and take out loans, your kid can go here.*

Feeble as it is, the media continues to be blamed by higher education administrators for blowing college costs out of all proportion—part of a rationalization every Psych 101 student knows as “denial.” If the increases continue to be extravagant, it doesn’t matter what the base cost is—especially at the same time the proportion of the budget spent on actual instruction has been shrinking, along with the average faculty workload and the length of the academic calendar, while the proportion of budgets spent on marketing and public relations is growing.

Maybe there are reasonable answers to the questions about higher education costs and productivity. Maybe Americans would be sympathetic to them. But reporters have to ask, and universities to answer.

My favorite example of such unasked questions comes from a story about primary education: the patriotic Philadelphia summit convened by President Clinton and General Colin Powell in 1997 to recruit millions of public-spirited volunteers whose jobs would be to help third-graders learn to read. Despite virtual saturation print and broadcast coverage, no one asked why, in a nation that spends \$600 billion a year on education, there are millions of illiterate third-graders.

Nor are universities and colleges above attempting to mislead the public. Why shouldn’t they, if they can pull it off so easily? Witness the campaign to persuade families that they can still afford tuition—that beats explaining why the big annual increases have far outstripped income. Or an announcement of an early buyout plan one cash-strapped local university described as a “voluntary tenured faculty sep-

## ELEVATING THE HIGHER EDUCATION BEAT

*John O. Harney*

The irony was thick last spring as *Boston Magazine* senior editor Jon Marcus told a group of academics meeting at Boston College that he considered *Boston Business Journal* higher education reporter Scott Van Voorhis to be one of the best in the business.

It’s always newsworthy when one reporter compliments another in public, but there’s more to this story.

Turns out Van Voorhis was about to leave the higher ed beat to cover commercial real estate for the *BBJ*—much as Marcus had left the Associated Press a few months earlier after establishing the AP’s Boston bureau as the hub of the national wire service’s higher ed coverage.

*Boston Globe* higher education reporter Richard Chacon had been scheduled to join Marcus at the BC gathering, but never showed. Chacon was also in the process of ditching the higher ed beat at that very moment.

A seismic shift in Boston’s higher education reporting?

Hardly. If there’s one constant on the higher education beat at New England’s newspapers, it’s high turnover.

Chacon was at least the fourth reporter to head the *Globe*’s higher education beat since the start of the ’90s. Also in the past year, Carol Gerwin, who had emerged as a key higher ed reporter at the Quincy, Mass., *Patriot Ledger*, left the daily to join *CommonWealth*, the quarterly magazine of the Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth.

Another talented higher ed reporter at the *Brockton Enterprise* landed a high-paying p.r. job at the University of Massachusetts.

Some observers inside and outside higher education note that the short tenure among higher ed reporters hurts coverage. “There’s no memory,” says public relations consultant Soterios Zoulas whose clients include several Massachusetts colleges. Exhibit A, according to Zoulas, is press corps reaction to calls for eliminating certain public campuses.

“They think proposals to close colleges are idle threats,” he says, “because not one of them was around to cover the closing of Boston State.”

There are some bright spots. The *BBJ* covers higher education competently in the context of business. A few dailies in markets with heavy concentrations of colleges—such as the *Springfield Union-News*—provide significant coverage of local campuses. And the *Globe* has begun featuring thoughtful opinion pieces by college leaders in an occasional editorial page feature called “The President’s Corner.”

Nonetheless, the higher education beat cuts a remarkably low-profile in a region where it should be front and center.

Turnover is not the only problem.

Time is a problem too. Even at larger newspapers, higher education reporters often shoulder other responsibilities. The *Boston*

aration.” Problem is, too few education journalists challenge the evasions and euphemisms. Just as few who covered the findings of the National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education exercised the discretion to point out that 11 of the commission’s 13 members represented universities or university associations.

Education is, in fact, one of the most important topics in America. Few stories elicit reactions as strong as news about colleges and universities. Educators ought to take this as a compliment. Theirs are institutions where parents aspire to enroll their children and where students enjoy their first true taste of independence. Sports fans follow the athletic teams. Alumni savor the nostalgia. Businesses depend on them for competent employees and for basic and applied research.

Yet criticism of colleges and universities has increased as fast as their tuition. And cost is not the only complaint. There also is the ongoing debate about political correctness, in which even false charges are regurgitated by reporters who reprint them uncontested.

*Herald* education reporter covers K-12 and higher education both—a sensible pairing perhaps, but in these parts, a lot of work for one reporter. Indeed, few higher education reporters have sufficient time to get out and visit campuses.

That’s one reason why what little higher ed coverage there is focuses heavily on a dozen or so very prestigious institutions and state colleges, where the news (often negative) is easily gathered from bureaucrats in a convenient central office. Meanwhile, about 250 other New England colleges and universities—the New Hampshire and Anna Maria colleges of the world—plug along with little media notice. Says Zoulas, “There’s a whole group of institutions that are below the radar screen.”

Moreover, when the gravity of a higher education story crosses a certain threshold—such as last year’s comprehensive *Globe* series on the power of Harvard—editors often bypass the higher education beat in favor of more seasoned reporters.

Other big stories slip through the cracks. Consider the likely profound impact of the Asian financial crisis on New England campuses in terms of lost foreign enrollment and tuition revenue—covered briefly by Van Voorhis at the *BBJ* but generally missed.

The sad truth is that the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, a Washington D.C.-based national weekly that relies on stringers for local stories, regularly scoops New England dailies on New England campus news and trends.

To be sure, a wide range of traditional newspaper beats such as state government reporting are suffering at the hands of bot-

tom-line-oriented, corporate journalism. So why fret about the sorry condition of the higher education beat?

Weak higher education coverage does not help higher education. Good education journalism would remind its audience of the huge economic impact of colleges and universities, and detail gains from campus research, for example. But it would also intelligently report criticisms and reflect growing public anger at a time when colleges themselves appear too often to dismiss concerns about cost and other controversies.

Not all campuses are public places in the legal sense, but they are public possessions in the emotional (and financial) sense, and therefore accountable to neighbors, parents, students, prospects and alumni. And yet important higher education stories in New England are more often absent than on the front page or the evening news. Except, unfortunately, the ones that recapitulate the press releases.

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tom-line-oriented, corporate journalism. So why fret about the sorry condition of the higher education beat?

The reason is simple. New England is America’s academic breadbasket. The region grants a disproportionate share of college degrees, conducts a disproportionate share of university research, snares a disproportionate share of scientific patents, attracts a disproportionate share of foreign college students—you get the picture. New England newspapers should be all over higher education like the *Washington Post* on government. But they’re not.

A modest proposal:

Boston-area colleges run centers for animals and public policy, war and social consequences, work and family—and notably, defense journalism. Maybe it’s time for Boston University’s College of Communication or some aspiring J-school to launch a Center for Higher Education Journalism, complete with reporters-in-residence and serious research on higher education news and news reporting. Maybe a graduate school of education would be willing to play a role.

In the meantime, if you want to be the dean of the New England higher education beat, the position is wide open.

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## PRESS PASS

### Boston News Organizations Ignore Higher Education

*Soterios C. Zoulas*

**L**ast spring, Dr. Judah Folkman and his research team at Boston's Children's Hospital discovered two new drugs that interfere with the blood supply which tumors need to grow. Boston television stations quickly dispatched an army of reporters and producers to Boston's Longwood Medical area to cover the story of a possible cancer cure. The city's broadcast media whipped themselves into a frenzy.

The attention paid to this medical story is neither atypical nor excessive. Boston, after all, is home to several of the world's best hospitals and medical research centers. For years, the major Boston television news stations have assigned a reporter to cover medicine and medical research. Their commitment to medical news coverage has produced compelling, innovative and important television news reporting and commentary by Dr. Timothy Johnson and others. Indeed, coverage of medical news by WCVB-TV, Boston's ABC affiliate, has visibly influenced the network's national coverage.

Boston—and New England—can claim one other similarly towering industry. But it's hard to imagine it attracting the attention that the Children's Hospital story commanded. That industry, of course, is higher education. Yet none of the Hub's TV news stations maintains a real education beat,

much less a *higher* education beat. And the neglect of education is not restricted to broadcast journalism.

Poll after poll shows that the No. 1 issue in the hearts and minds of Americans these days is education. Even politicians this election season focused on class size, teacher testing, education quality and reform, college costs and tenure. But the media—broadcast and print—tend to stay home. Especially when the story involves higher education.

#### **Higher education**

Massachusetts is the Mecca of higher education. Harvard and MIT reside like twin colossuses on the banks of the Charles River. More than 125 public and private colleges and universities located in Massachusetts enroll more than 400,000 students every year. Their impact on the Massachusetts economy is obviously profound.

You might expect then that the Boston media would pursue a relatively high level of education reporting. You might even expect that the major daily newspapers in the city would cover education in the same way that the *Los Angeles Times* covers Hollywood or the way the *Washington Post* covers Beltway politics and government policy. Alas, not so.

The *Boston Globe* is the dominant daily newspaper in New England. Now owned by the *New York Times*, the *Globe* has overwhelmed its rival, the *Boston Herald*, with superior numbers and more extensive coverage of important education issues. The *Globe* also hired away several *Herald* education reporters over the years, including Ian Foreman of the old *Traveler* (which merged with the *Herald*), who helped write a watershed series on education in the mid-1960s, called "The Mess in Bay State Schools." That series led to a massive restructuring of Massachusetts public education from kindergarten to graduate school—and ushered in new, albeit modest, interest in education reporting.

In 1974, Muriel Cohen, also formerly of the *Traveler*, helped the *Globe* win a Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the court-ordered desegregation of Boston's public schools. Cohen dominated education coverage for the next two decades.

More recently, the *Globe* has assigned at least three reporters to cover the Boston public schools, suburban education and higher education. After years of traveling around the deep back pages of the *Boston Sunday Globe*, a weekly "Learning" section now occupies a regular place at the rear of the "Books" section. During the past year or so, the paper has introduced op-ed space for college presidents and a regular weekly column called the "Lesson Plan," which is written by the three education reporters. Meanwhile, the *Boston Sunday Globe's* weekly regional sections cover, in the words of a former *Globe* education reporter, three topics: education, shopping and real estate.

But despite its dominant position through much of New England, the *Globe* focuses narrowly on a few top institutions—Harvard, MIT and Boston College—and on the Massachusetts public higher education system mainly when the state Board of Higher Education lowers or raises tuition or threatens to close down programs. The more than 100 other private colleges in Massachusetts alone receive little or no coverage unless there is a scandal. Colleges and universities in other New England states have to struggle mightily for even a mention.

Meanwhile, the worst laggard in covering higher education not surprisingly, is television news. While competition is keen among Boston's major television news operations—WBZ, WCVB, WHDH, WLVI, Fox 25 and New England Cable News—it's no secret that glitz has supplanted substance. Even WABU, owned and operated by Boston University, does little or no news and has no education programming. WGBH-TV, the premier public broadcasting station in the country and a major producer of national PBS programming, does no regular local (or national) education programming.

Documentaries on local as well as national television are an endangered species. No, they are nonexistent. In the 1970s, WBZ and WCVB could produce and air hard-hitting documentaries on important education issues. (One on special education that I wrote and produced for WSBK-TV was nominated for an Emmy and won a national media award from ABC Television.) But those days are long gone.

Sure, WGBH-TV's *Greater Boston* examines serious education issues on occasion. WCVB's *Chronicle* explores college costs and higher education trends at least once a year—and actually visits colleges to talk to students, teachers and administrators. But by and large, television news and public affairs programming skims the surface of any education topic. Stories such as the death of an MIT student from excessive alcohol consumption and the Commonwealth's first statewide teacher proficiency exam capture attention for a few days, but the coverage tends to

be superficial. Meetings of state education boards, important pronouncements of commissioners and chancellors, and outrageous comments of board chairs are covered by reporters with little or no background or no institutional memory—if they are covered at all. Not surprisingly, these stories are rarely placed in a proper context or followed up.

Local radio talk shows are hosted in large measure by shock jocks like WRKO's Howie Carr whose interest in education seems to languish until a public college president is in trouble or the opportunity to ridicule public school teachers presents itself. Even WBUR's Christopher Lydon, a former *New York Times* and *Boston Globe* reporter who ran for mayor of Boston several years ago on an education platform, has paid scant attention to education on his *Connection* program. And WBZ's David Brudnoy, a fixture on Boston radio for more than 25 years, takes a rigidly libertarian and anti-government point of view toward most issues. Brudnoy, to his credit, freely shares his microphone with people who hold differing points of view. But his own attitude toward public education at all levels is negative, condescending and full of ridicule.

Boston radio news is mostly of the rip and read variety. Some of the most popular rock stations such as WBCN offer no news at all. WBZ radio, Boston's all-news station, rarely covers higher education. WBUR, one of the two local National Public Radio affiliates, has become a major news outlet in the Boston market. While it does devote airtime to all kinds of education stories and covers them intelligently, its commitment seems lukewarm given the importance of higher education in this market.

Issues such as distance learning, the growth of for-profit institutions of higher education like the University of Phoenix and its foray into the Northeast have not been examined. Locally, the *Globe* rarely explores the small, private New England colleges that have reinvented themselves dramatically over the years and educated thousands of students. Nor have many papers seriously assessed how community colleges are coping with an increased responsibility to provide remedial education to thousands of students ill-prepared by the public schools.

Today's reporters want the quick hit, the front-page story, the scandal. Education coverage, most of the time, doesn't fit that mold. It takes time to develop contacts that lead to good stories; it takes effort and institutional memory to do them right. The solution to the problem of lackluster higher education coverage is an old-fashioned one: have reporters spend less time in boardrooms and newsrooms and more time in classrooms and on campuses, where students, faculty and administrators do the real work of education.

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## TECHNICAL FOUL

### The Growing Communication Gap Between Specialists and the Rest of Us

*Kristin R. Woolever*

**T**he most important skill for technical professionals is the ability to communicate technology, and it is the skill in shortest supply in the fields of science and technology.

That assertion may raise eyebrows in these days of second-generation Internet and space travel for septuagenarians. But the preliminary results of a new survey of corporate executives and engineering and science professors reveals that the relatively low-tech skill of communicating technical information is the one employers yearn for most.

Sadly, neither industry nor educational institutions pay sufficient attention to remedying this problem. And New England, with its reputation as the cradle of American education and technology, lags well behind other regions in this regard.

Back in 1982—when Bill Gates was a software neophyte, the Internet was essentially unheard of and we did our banking with live tellers—Ray Stata, founder of Analog Devices,

and forward-thinking colleagues Dan Dimancescu and James Botkin, sounded an important warning in their book *Global Stakes: The Future of High Technology in America*. “As scientific knowledge becomes more and more advanced,” the authors observed, “fewer and fewer people are privy to its meaning and able to control the power it confers.”

Today, the balance of power is at a precarious tilt.

Communication is a critical component in creating access to anything. In today’s increasingly global economy, where it is important to be able to join conversations around the world, we are often unable to converse intelligently even among ourselves concerning science and technology.

Open almost any technical writing textbook and somewhere in the early pages you will find a discussion of technical “discourse communities.” While encouraging students to participate in these technical conversations, the textbook authors—myself included—go on to suggest that the language spoken and written in technical fields is highly specialized with key terms, organizational structures and conventions all its own. Even more frustrating for students, each specialized area of the sciences and technology has its own discourse community that may not talk the same talk as those professionals working in other technical specialties. In the computer industry, for example, programmers, publication specialists and marketing professionals might as well be speaking foreign languages, so specialized are their vocabularies.

With technology advancing at lightning speed, the communication gaps among different technical professionals—and between those specialists and the general public—are growing to chasm proportions.

Those who understand the language of science and technology—those who can participate fully in the technical conversations—have the power to control the discourse. At a dangerous extreme, when only a few are privy to meaning, as Stata and colleagues noted, they become “gatekeepers” with the power to selectively approve research to be funded, developed and published. In competitive research and development environments, the ability to control the discourse becomes the key to intentional disinformation, misinformation and unethical behavior.

In this regard, history provides many examples from the Tuskegee experiments on black men early in this century to the controversies over the health risks of Viagra, fluoride-treated water and Fen-Phen diet aids. And the stakes will only get higher. Congress has vowed to double the budget of the National Institutes of Health over the next five years, already approving \$15.6 billion for 1999—a 15 percent increase over the funding for the previous year. Research labs that get the bulk of the funds will be those that gain the attention of the Senate Appropriations Committee. Much depends on who controls the information and who presents the best argument.

Of course, professions will always have their own terms of art. But even as science and technology permeate nearly every aspect of our daily lives, specialized discourse excludes most of us from joining a meaningful conversation about what matters. Indeed, the general public is disenfranchised from knowledge that would allow people to make sense of their world and make informed decisions about how to navigate fields as diverse as politics, banking, theater, photography, medicine, insurance, computer technology, library science and so on. Negotiating on-line card catalogs in a library, for instance, banking on-line or evaluating the soundness of a medical recommendation are commonplace activities where most of us have to place our trust in the professional delivering the goods.

The communication gap has enabled an odd assortment of corporations, celebrities and media outlets to foist false cures, expensive weapons and other dubious scientific advances upon a vulnerable public.

In countless instances, miscommunication has been the catalyst for public outcry and fear of new technology. Was nuclear power a godsend or was it responsible for radiation

poisoning of those living near reactor sites? In other instances, the communication gap has enabled an odd assortment of corporations, celebrities and media outlets to foist false cures, expensive weapons and other dubious scientific advances upon a vulnerable public.

New England boasts one of the greatest concentrations of high-tech and biotech companies in the world, as well as an unparalleled concentration of colleges and universities. So we must have the pieces in place to close the technical communication gap, right? Wrong.

The communication breakdown is not restricted to the widening gap between specialists and the public. Within technical and science environments, the professionals themselves are too often unable to convey basic information to their colleagues. Consider the case of the health professional who miscommunicates appropriate treatment on a patient's medical chart or the software developer whose muddled technical specifications cause delays in product shipments and cost overruns. Or worse, the memorandum from Babcock & Wilcox Co. that warned of a potential nuclear reactor meltdown prior to the Three Mile Island disaster, but was so obtuse it was ignored.

Technical workers need to be able to communicate with each other in order to conduct business and grease the wheels of productivity. When one product developer or scientist cannot communicate her work clearly to another, the research grinds to a halt until sufficient understanding allows work to resume. The ability to convey technical information provides a foundation for constructing new knowledge and greater insight in these fields.

### **Tech Comm 101**

New England boasts one of the greatest concentrations of high-technology and biotechnology companies in the world, as well as an unparalleled concentration of colleges and universities. So New England, of all places, must have the pieces in place to close the technical communication gap, right?

Wrong. While some New England community colleges and a few universities offer coursework or programs in technical communication, this field is vastly underrepresented in the region's curricula. Only eight New England institutions—all of them in

Massachusetts—offer programs in technical communication, according to the Washington, D.C.-based Society for Technical Communication, a professional group. By contrast, 14 institutions in Ohio and 16 in California offer such programs.

**Students are taught freshman composition—the tenets of good prose writing. But they are not trained to speak and write in their fields of specialization.**

Only Bentley and Fitchburg State colleges offer bachelor's programs in technical communication, while a handful of others offer continuing education certificates in the field. Almost all of these undergraduate and continuing education programs focus only on writing for the computer industry.

Northeastern University and Simmons College offer master's degree programs specifically in technical communication, while Boston University offers a master's in science journalism—that's it at the graduate level.

Not a single New England institution offers a Ph.D. in technical communication. And despite their rich technical resources, New England academic institutions have collaborated little with one another or with businesses on matters of technical communication.

At the basic level in any profession, people should be able to organize, synthesize, understand and apply information in various situations. Yet, most employers in technical fields find that their workforces are unprepared to handle these basic functions.

In spite of increased attention to hands-on learning and practice-oriented education, there is a serious “disconnect” between academic institutions and business when it comes to preparing students to communicate technology.

In many colleges and universities, students are taught freshman composition—the tenets of good prose writing—where they read essays by writers such as Annie Dillard, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and E.B. White. But they are not trained to speak and write in their fields of specialization.

Writing-across-the-curriculum programs, which gained popularity in the 1970s, attempted to remedy this problem by requiring students to take writing courses in their major fields of study. But teachers responsible for the classroom work were either practitioners in specialized technical fields who had no training in how to teach writing or writing teachers who had never been good technical practitioners. Students then and now are left with the impression that “good writing” (the subject of freshman composition classes) is not applicable or useful in their engineering or science courses, and certainly not useful in the real world.

At a more advanced level, education for technical communicators should also provide opportunities for serious graduate students—theorists and practitioners alike—to study the field of technical communication in depth and perhaps develop breakthrough methods aimed at improving our ability to understand and use technology.

Doctoral programs in technical communication could be particularly important in providing meaningful connections between education and business where both parties work together to increase the efficiency of communication and increase the productivity of the workplace. Such Ph.D.-level programs would not only provide necessary training for those who will teach technical communication in colleges and universities. They would also produce graduates able to partner with industry and operate at more than just a basic skill level—addressing real-world problems in communication on a theoretical level and enabling solutions to be systemic and preventative, rather than quick fixes.

At the New England Board of Higher Education's semi-annual meeting in October 1998, delegates identified understanding the impact of technology upon New England among the board's key goals. Surely, devising creative and collaborative ways to address the issue of communication and technology will help provide all New Englanders with access to the scientific and technological advances that so permeate the present and, without a doubt, will determine our future.

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