

Language of Respect

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Respect: That's what we all want, isn't it? Is that too much to ask?

These thoughts come to mind each time I read or hear news stories that purport to report on some aspect or occurrence in the private career college and school field. Terms like: *for profit*, *proprietary*, and *trade school* are most common; but, *matchbook schools* and *fly-by-night* still creep in every now and then.

Words are so powerful in what they describe; the image that they leave; the symbolism that they represent. Using them correctly is essential to understanding what they are attempting to convey. The selection of words is even more insidious when used by others to paint an odious picture.

Encouraging the media to be more up-to-date and less derogatory terminology won't be easy. Habits are hard to break. Having been interviewed and quoted hundreds of times, I can appreciate the challenge that this phraseology represents. But we need to do it. The language of description won't change unless we take an active role in changing it.

Recently I was interviewed by the *Dallas Business Journal* who wanted to know why all those "for profit" universities were coming to town. "You mean, 'tax paying'?" I said, remembering my good friend, Dick Fulton, the late general counsel for AICS, when I was president of the association, who said there were three types of institutions: tax paying – career colleges; tax avoiding – private non-profit institutions; and, tax consuming – the state university and college systems. She responded, "Oh, you have no issue with us; we believe in profit at this publication."

I took a moment – but could have taken an hour – to explain our sensitivity to the term "for profit," which is too often used as a derogatory expression by someone wishing to cast aspirations in our direction, alluding to the profit motive as somehow being illegal,

unethical, or immoral. They seem to be saying that it isn't possible to conduct education for profit without somehow cheating the student. Non-profit or public is seen as a purely eleemosynary enterprise where profit is sacrificed for quality education and service. Were that only the case!

Although she was supportive and understanding, her interview only served to remind me of the number of times that private career colleges and schools have been separated from others in higher education solely because of our profit motive. Things may be on the verge of improving as the Congress is considering the Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act with an eye toward correcting or improving elements of higher education by making all institutions more accountable. Questions regarding graduation rates and transfer credit practices have taken a particularly high profile in recent discussions. The Career College Association has effectively carried the water to encourage this debate.

Changes are coming at the state level, too. For example, because of the lobbying efforts of the members of the Career Colleges and Schools of Texas, modifications have been achieved in the state laws and regulations changing the terminology from "proprietary schools" to "career colleges and schools" at the Texas Workforce Commission and "Career Colleges" at the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, which oversees all degree-granting institutions in the state. These are significant changes. They reflect a better understanding of the role of these institutions. They carry with them a higher level of respect.

"Trade school" appears frequently in newspaper and magazine articles. Parts of the employment sections of newspapers that encourage education or training are still labeled "trade school." The term was once a most-respected and well-reflective term. But now it is outmoded. We still have trades certainly, and there are most of them have practitioners who are valued and essential to our economy, but today's *trades* and yesterday's *trades* are quite different. In earlier days a trade was much more of a skilled, manual labor, hands-on kind of occupation; whereas today, the role requires a good deal more mental capability, as well as higher competencies that must be mastered through significant

education and/or experience. For those reasons, “career school” is much more apropos and appropriate, than “trade school.”

Similarly, “career school” is a recognition of the lifelong impact such education has on its students. A student learns the skills and competencies at a career college or school that will enable him or her to qualify for a good job and a great career. Such expectations are central to contract that develops between the institution and its students, as well as between the institution and its customers – the employers. Efforts should be made locally and nationally to explain the difference to habit-bound publications and newspapers, yellow pages, and the like, so that these terms can fade from popularity and use.

There’s another word that is perhaps the most pervasive descriptor and it is one that we ourselves are guilty of perpetrating. The term is “industry.” We have forever been describing ourselves as the “school industry,” or “trade school industry,” or the “business school industry,” or just “our industry.”

When I was chairman of the board of CCA, I pondered the reasons why we were always being separated from others in higher education by laws and regulations. Certainly, our profit motive had something to do with it, as well as the fact that we weren’t regionally accredited for the most part. The subject matter of our curriculum was looked down on by those engaged by other institutions in higher education. We weren’t educating; we were training, *they* said, and that role was demeaning. *They* didn’t seem to respect us, our students, or the curriculum we offered. Our response seemed to be to ignore their ignorance.

To make it worse or to compound the problem, as I began to pay more attention to the importance of words and what we were saying about ourselves in speeches, articles, comments from the floor at meetings, and in Congressional testimony, I recognized that we were a part of the problem, and still are. Regretfully, I heard us or saw us using the term “our industry” in describing who we are and what we do. The attention I paid to language wasn’t restricted to what *we* were saying; I heard similar descriptions from

others. More often than I want to remember, I heard someone from somewhere else say, “Well, the trade school industry is.....” thus and so, usually negative and derogatory.

That’s funny, I thought, I wonder who else in higher education describes themselves as an “industry?” Do the community colleges or the state universities? No. Do the land grant colleges? No. Do the research universities? No. Do the Historical Black Colleges and Universities? No.

Only the institutions involved in career colleges speak of themselves collectively as an “industry.” And it dawned on me that by doing so, we were contributing to the separation phenomenon. We, ourselves, had created another way to describe us. We were separating ourselves from others in higher education and enlarging the negative appraisal. We have to stop this, I thought, and set about to change our ways. I advocated that the word be stricken from our vocabulary; that we would never, ever use it in describing ourselves either to others or to ourselves in everyday conversation. I was determined that nationally we would no longer speak of ourselves as an “industry” as hard as that was going to be because it was so ingrained in us and our vision of ourselves. We had used the word too long and too often. We had to be pledged to spread the word and to explain the importance of the language nuisances to our family as well as others.

But to change our ways, we had to find another word to substitute for the plural descriptor of “us.” What would that word be? Well, we had to find a word that had the affect of including us in rather than reflecting us out of the rest of those in higher education. Since none of the other collections of institutions, who could be separated by delivery mode or purpose used “industry,” we needed a term that they could identify with also. The word that came to mind as being most appropriate was “sector,” as in “We are the career colleges and schools sector of higher education.” Just as there is a community college sector and a state university sector, etc. By using this word, we eliminate one of the ways we are separated from the other institutional groups in higher education. To me this was the only way we would effectively level the playing field, an objective that dates back many, many years.

As chairman of the advisory committee of the *Career Education Review*, I have encouraged the editors to be particularly sensitive to publishing articles that contained the word “industry.” I recommended that they edit the articles to eliminate the word so as to contribute to the need to color our conversation in a more constructive manner. Since we are best known by how we describe ourselves, best we do it thoughtfully and with purpose.

In my view we can gain respect only by being seen as a legitimate sector of higher education; an effective and unique delivery system different from but essentially included in the necessary mix of institutions that make up the diversity of the American system of higher education. We should celebrate our differences while trumpeting our similarities.

Career colleges and schools serve a special purpose, as do the other sectors of higher education. We are so essential to our economy that if we did not exist, we would have to be invented to serve the students who choose our educational delivery system over others – sometimes choosing us after failing with the others! To this degree I do not entertain the notion that we have any competitors, certainly not the community colleges or the state universities. It is true that other institutions within our sector can be described as competitors; but even then, there are characteristics that separate and differentiate us.

Our greater challenges are not within our sector, but within higher education itself that in too many ways sees us as a threat: Any recognition we gain diminishes them; a funding gain to us is a funding loss to them. Listen to the debate over the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, which is full of examples. By taking the high ground, focusing on outcomes and satisfied customers – student-graduates and employers – we can center the debate on the most important factor in any higher education equation – the student.