

# THE CRITIC

## LETTERS

### THE PROFS AND PROFITS PICTURE

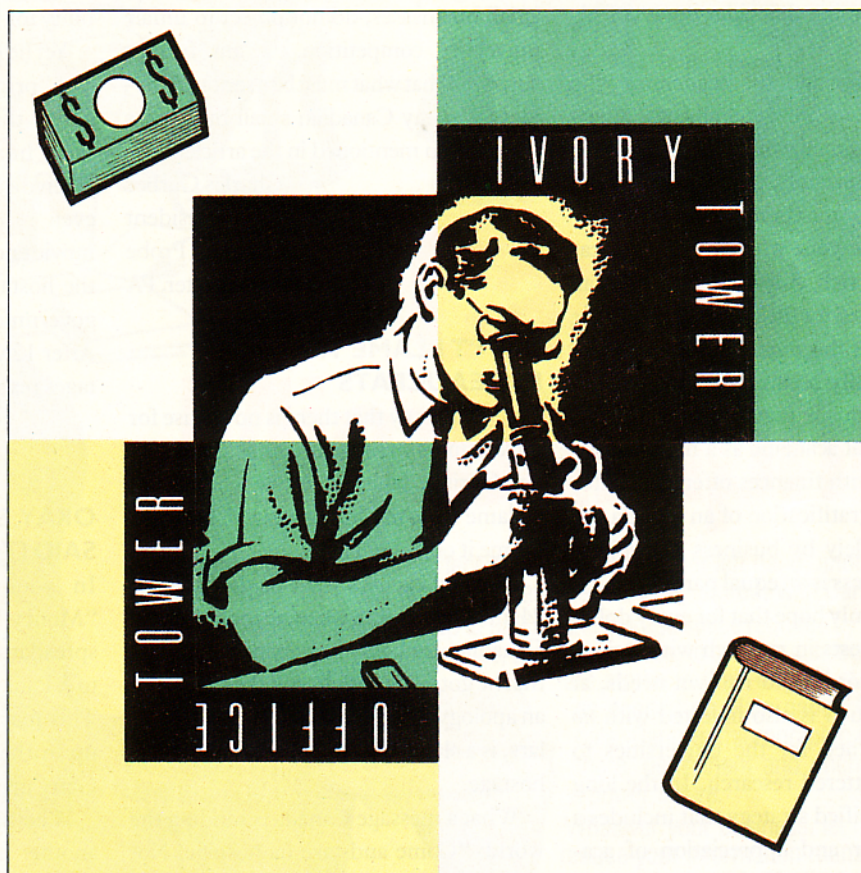
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**A**s a social scientist in a Canadian university, I have certainly witnessed the phenomenon you describe in your article *The profit-minded professors* (by David Helwig, January). The burgeoning links you sketch between the university and business communities can be seen beyond the natural science disciplines on which your article focused.

I would agree that there are benefits to be gained through this courtship. Nonetheless, I sincerely hope that the relationship remains platonic, since I would argue that science, and ultimately all of us, would be ill-served by a marriage. The inherent conflicts are several. Science flourishes through the open exchange of

information; business covets secrets in order to retain a competitive edge. In science, knowledge is a public resource; in business, one attempts to secure proprietary rights to knowledge through patents. Science seeks long-term goals and believes these are best served through freedom of inquiry; business seeks more immediate payoffs, emphasizing focused objectives and centralized control in the interests of efficiency. Thus, although we have much to offer one another, I would prefer that we just remain friends.

Social factors have led to the liaisons enumerated in your article. At least one of the partners has been given a push onto the entrepreneurial dance floor. Academe

has been reeling after years of inadequate funding by provincial and federal governments for post-secondary education and basic research, particularly during the past five or six years. The universities have looked for alternative means to continue their centuries-old mission. One impetus has been to raise tuition fees, with the attendant danger that access to Canadian universities may become determined more directly by wealth than by brains. And then there is business—the potential Prince Charming that rides horses of silver and gold.

Universities and the academics who populate them are generally not motivated by decadence or conspicuous consumption. Certainly, one would have to wonder about the cognitive abilities and/or ethics of anyone who becomes an academic to get rich. Adequate funding is all that is required for the universities to have autonomy in the pursuit of their objectives. It is only because funding has become inadequate that business will attempt to treat academe as a harlot for its own ends, with finances offered only for immediate gratification of an agenda determined solely by business or projects where business is an equal partner.

One can only hope that for every dollar business invests in research with strings attached according to its own needs, at least that much is also invested with *no* strings attached for the universities to pursue unfettered research. In the long run, a diversified strategy that includes a tolerance for and appreciation of academe's curiosity-guided (and often esoteric) pursuit of knowledge will bring greater rewards than a myopic strategy in which business attempts to recreate the universities in its own image.

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