



# University of Nike: How Corporate Cash Bought American Higher Education

*Joshua Hunt*

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**University of Nike: How Corporate Cash Bought American Higher Education** Joshua Hunt  
The dramatic expose of how the University of Oregon sold its soul to Nike--and what that means for the future of academics and college sports.

In the world of college sports, winning means big dollars. But that money often comes at a cost. *University of Nike* explores the University of Oregon's complex relationship with its corporate partner, Nike, and how the arrangement has undermined the school's academic integrity, transparency, and campus culture. Through tenacious reporting and riveting storytelling, *The University of Nike* investigates a crisis moment in higher education.

## University of Nike: How Corporate Cash Bought American Higher Education Details

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## From Reader Review University of Nike: How Corporate Cash Bought American Higher Education for online ebook

### Miller says

Having absorbed a lot of this living and consuming media here in Eugene for a couple of decades, it is hardly a bombshell, but it is an excellent telling of what happened to the U of O over that time. A cautionary tale of what has become of state-funded higher education in general and how - slowly but surely - a large, well-respected public institution gets corporatized....and corrupted. Excellent work and a good read. (And it helps if you enjoy college football.)

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### Stu says

In the world of college football trash talk, the "University of Nike" pejorative is deployed as a way to discredit Oregon's gridiron success. Unlike "blue blood" schools that can lure recruits by leaning on decades of tradition -- think Alabama, Ohio State, Georgia, Oklahoma -- Oregon's flashy uniforms and space-age locker rooms are the program's only selling points to potential players. Forget scheme and execution and coaching acumen, forget the beautiful campus and overall lushness of the Willamette Valley, the thinking goes, the *real* reason why Oregon hauls in the talent necessary to no longer be a Pac-12 cellar-dweller is because 17-year-old players are enticed by shiny trinkets. Oregon's success, then, is the result of gimmickry and hype.

What Joshua Hunt's book does is demonstrate that there is something *more* to the "University of Nike" moniker, something sinister. It's a book about ethical compromises, about corporate cruelty and the evilness of privatization. It's a book about what happens when a university is more concerned with building an army of ruthlessly effective P.R. reps to protect its "brand" than it is ensuring students' safety. It is "a damning indictment," as a front-cover blurb boasts, and it is essential reading for any Oregon fan or alum.

Although Hunt approaches the topic with nuance and care, the book's overall argument is fairly blunt, at least by my reading: the University of Oregon, by relying so heavily on donations from Phil Knight, has become subservient to Nike, and that power dynamic is undeniably problematic. Oregon isn't the only school to prioritize athletics over academics, surely not, but the overwhelming size and scope and power of the Nike brand, not to mention Knight's complicated personal relationship with the university, makes Oregon perhaps *the* most glaring -- or at least most fascinating to look at -- example of monetary corruption in higher education.

All the ugliness you can imagine is here. Cover-ups of sexual assaults committed by star athletes? Check. Obscene tuition increases to cover dizzying, borderline out-of-control athletic department spending? Check. A public records department growing increasingly opaque and decreasingly ethical in its mission to protect the school's (read: the school's biggest benefactor's) reputation? Check. Again, these problems aren't unique to the University of Oregon -- Hunt sets his tale within a helpful and broad historical context -- but the sheer *speed* of the culture change in Eugene -- a complete overhaul of a school's values, priorities, and responsibilities, all in a handful of years -- underscores just how thoroughly private/corporate money can pervert a public institution.

(My only quibble, and it is a very small one, is the attention paid to on-the-field action. There's a page-long description of a Rose Bowl blocking scheme that doesn't add anything to the text -- not to mention being the sort of breakdown done far better elsewhere, by professional football writers -- and while the influx of

private cash into the university and the ascendancy of Oregon football are concurrent, thus inextricably linked, some of the game recaps feel unnecessary. This is truly a book more about the tension between entities that serve the public good and bottom-line-focused corporations than it is a book about football, and I worry the more sports-heavy sections may deter potential readers who have no interest in, say, a running back's record-setting stats.)

4.5 stadiums out of 5

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## Mary Humphrey says

Shocking details of the insidious details of the relationship between the University of Oregon & Phil Knight (Nike). Is it so important that college athletics remain supreme to the detriment of a woman's right to security, privacy and freedom from sexual assault? Great research and reporting so that we learn the truth about the role of a university that has totally compromised its integrity as an academic institution. Residents of Oregon have less access to a higher education, professor's salaries have been reduced, student tuitions increase and yet athletes gain privileged status to all possible perks for their tainted performance. This is a must read for everyone who truly values the institutions that educate & provide research opportunities that succeed only by their adherence to standards of excellence as independent entities not as slaves to corporate America. Joshua Hunt deserves the highest praise for his exposure of the Nike behemoth & its cowardly partner in this crime against decency and truth, the University of Oregon. May this book reveal and shame. Deservedly so.

“A searing indictment”—INSIDE HIGHER ED

“Providing fascinating and alarming insight into how other public universities have emulated similar practices in obtaining endorsement deals and partnerships at the expense of their values, this is for readers of sports journalism and true stories of corporate America.” —BOOKLIST REVIEWS

“In this fascinating, candid tale, Hunt exposes Nike's astonishing transformation of the University of Oregon into a modern American university — in other words, a power center of education, wealth, and college football unlike other institutions of learning across the globe.” —Vanessa Grigoriadis, author of *Blurred Lines: Rethinking Sex, Power, and Consent*

“In this illuminating case study Joshua Hunt connects the dots between endorsement deals and campus sexual assault. University of Nike is a must read for anyone worried about the higher-education industrial complex, which should be all of us.” —Malcolm Harris, author of *Kids These Days*

“A page-turning work of investigative reporting. Much of it details the perfidy of Nike and its founder Phil Knight. But, as the title suggests, this book is also about the damage that America's tax-cutting mania and contempt for government has done to its public, land-grant universities . . . As Hunt shows, by starving institutions like the University of Oregon of resources, an unholy alliance of right-wingers and market-worshipping neoliberals has pushed colleges into the hands of corporate puppeteers like Nike. You need to read this compelling and disturbing book.” —Samuel G. Freedman, author of *Breaking The Line*

“Through diligent and deep-dive reporting, Hunt reveals how the University of Oregon sold its soul to a corporation. University of Nike is a damning indictment—it should be read by anyone who still believes in the privatization of public institutions. This book is proof that it's a bad idea when universities become shills for billionaires.” —Dale Maharidge, co-author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *And Their Children After Them*

“Joshua Hunt has weaved an amazing tale of power, greed and deceit. This should be a textbook for anyone

who wants to learn the truth about what's happening to public universities throughout the country.” —Andy Boyle, author of *Adulthood for Beginners*

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### **Lisa says**

A compelling story, well-told and well-researched. It raises many questions, not only about the particular institution it describes, but about the role of private companies in public education -- and it is hopefully a cautionary tale and not the shape of things to come!

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### **Joseph Jupille says**

Hunt narrates the intrusion of private interests into nominally public institutions by placing the relationship between Nike and the University of Oregon at the center of a multitiered mosaic. From the University of Nike, he drills down to the micro level personalities and confluences that made that particular relationship take the form that it did. He also works outward, beyond UO/UN, and even athletics, to the broader incursion of private money and interest into the public university.

Short-sighted taxpayers ultimately move this history. In Oregon, they passed Ballot Measure 5 in 1990, which pitted K-12 and university funding against each other, with predictable consequences for higher ed. Public funding for U of O plummeted, and relatively well-meaning, though also personally-conflicted university presidents had to get creative. Vampirish Nike founder Phil Knight gladly offers to fill the void, with plenty of strings attached. He is definitely looking out for #1 (himself/Nike) first, and while he has a fan's love for his alma mater, it never expresses itself beyond what's instrumental for Nike's bottom line. And boy, does Nike's bottom line improve over the decades. It all comes off as quite sick. The U of O prostitutes itself for the same reason that sex workers feel they must - in badly straitened circumstances, it needs the money. Uncle Phil is the perfect john.

Hunt elaborates a number of nicely done mini-narratives around the key personalities (Phil Knight and U of O President Dave Frohnmayer holding pride of place), and key issues (higher ed funding, big-time college athletics [including facilities, coaches' compensation, apparel companies, sexual assault and criminal impunity], the missions the public university, and others). Rather than trying to weave the mini-narratives continuously, Hunt sets them off from each others in a tiling approach, with a discrete history of, say, the military-university complex during the Cold War followed by a discrete Joey Heisman narrative, followed by the tragic story of Dave Frohnmayer's heart-breaking loss and heroic, though understandably sometimes-blinkered fight against Franconi Anemia. This approach allows Hunt to bring all of the necessary elements to his story forward, and I didn't have any particular trouble tying the elements together, but it felt only about 92% successful as writing, to me. Hunt gets a strong A-, but a more truly gifted writer could have spun these great materials together more successfully, IMO.

Where does this story leave us? Well, unless we rediscover and re-energize our notion of the public (with respect to universities, but also beyond), we are well and truly fucked. Doing stuff like teaching and conducting research costs money, and those providing the money will drive the train. All other things being equal, the broader the base of financial support, the more general the purposes that will be served. And the converse is also true - the narrower the base from which the money is drawn, the narrower the set of interests

served. For the life of me, I cannot understand why people cannot see that taxes enacted through democratic means are not tyranny, but provide the only reliable source of funding for the public goods which, by definition, benefit everyone. But I have little hope that, in today's informational environment, the people who need to return to this view will ever do so. And they and their children, more than those of us who are already there cognitively, who are struggling to stem the tide, but are also privileged to be able to navigate this new world, are ultimately the ones who will pay most of the price.

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## Jeff says

“University of Nike” by Joshua Hunt

4/5: I have long had a love-hate relationship with my alma mater, the University of Oregon.

I valued the education I received, and some of the professors I encountered, when pursuing my master's degree there in the 1980s. To this day, I enjoy following several of the UO's athletic teams, and I'm well aware that their success is attributable in large part to Phil Knight's generous largesse.

But from the perspective of The Register-Guard newsroom where I worked for 30 years, I have long been troubled, and infuriated, and flummoxed, by what I came to regard as the university's penchant for secrecy, disdain for transparency (and public records law) and general all-around hubris.

I was only mildly shocked a few years back when the university aggressively sought to hide rape charges against 3 basketball players (until they could compete in the NCAA tournament). But even I was stunned when officials confiscated the confidential therapy records of the players' accuser, in hopes of finding leverage against an expected lawsuit.

Joshua Hunt's “University of Nike” helped me to better understand how those outrages were tied to the Nike-backed privatization of this ostensibly public university. Also, how corporate cash has infected universities across the country, and how corporate conflicts could compromise future research at the UO's Knight Campus for Accelerating Science Impact.

I'm aware that Hunt's book has generated a good deal of backlash, especially around his reporting surrounding Knight's financial support of the Fanconi Anemia Research Fund, established by UO President Dave Frohnmayer and wife Lynn on behalf of their 3 daughters, who all had the rare genetic disorder. I'm not sure how to assess those criticisms. I know that Hunt spent 4 years researching this book, that the endnotes documenting his research exceed 40 pages, and that his historical contextualization and connect-the-dots assertions generally ring true to me. Several sloppy typos did concern me, casting some doubt about his larger conclusions.

Mostly, I found this book affirming ... of my own dismay about the university's institutional arrogance. I'm glad that some of its shenanigans are getting wider circulation.

I invite those who see the UO in a better light to give this book a chance ... commit to the first 50 pages, at least ... before rendering judgment.

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## Marylee Lannan says

I live in Eugene. Some of this I already knew, but, wow!

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### **Mike Stolfi says**

Would a private entity of long standing questionable labor practices be able to own a university in all but name if our tax dollars went to supporting the country at large?

Well no, but here we are. . .

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### **Vicki says**

Amazingly solid book that I highly, highly recommend as a follow-up if you liked Shoe Dog (minus one star for overly lengthy football play descriptions that don't have to do with the core narrative.)

What happens when public funding goes away from public education? Companies step in to fill the gap, and the result is corporatized universities that bend their knees to Nike's public relations department. In a thorough investigation, the author covers the relationship between Nike and the University of Oregon over the past 50 years. It is both heartbreaking and incense-invoking. No one comes out looking good, and the students come out worst of all.

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### **Sean Spang says**

When Lynn Frohnmayer says many of the claims many of the claims in the book about her and her family are objectively false it's hard to have confidence in everything else being true as well.

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### **Katie says**

Spent a little too long on historical events for my taste but an educational read. Lots of food for thought here.

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### **David says**

As the young people would say, he who pays the piper calls the tune. very deep dive into the relationship between Phil Knight, Nike, and U. of Oregon as an illustration of this point. Selling your soul and covering up sexual assaults by athletes in order to have \$ for nice new athletic facilities and a winning football team to attract more out-of-state full-tuition-paying students seems a dubious bargain.

some side trips to address other instances of higher ed selling out [e.g., influence of big pharma and of US military priorities on research], but mostly about U of O. might actually have been better to stick entirely to that case, as the others are not handled in enough depth to be convincing or to clarify the situations if reader not already familiar.

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### **Mark says**

What happens when a public university is faced with cuts in public funding? The first source to make up those dollars is tuition but that is a limited pool. The next source is alumni and friend but the trouble that too is a limited pool. Finally, the university may turn to foundations and research grants but again it)# difficult to make up continued cuts in public funding from these sources and that leads inevitably to cuts in services to students and faculty and staff layoffs.

When this happened to the University of Oregon in the mid-90s, a unique solution was found. The football team's success piqued the interest of alum and Nike founder Phil Knight. Seeing the potential for marketing and branding opportunities he offered his beloved university an open checkbook, if it cooperated with the company. It was a marriage made in marketing heaven. It was a devil's bargain to the tune of upwards of \$500 million in donations and the "University of Nike" was born. The cost to the University of Oregon through the years was the coverup of sexual assets, the concealment of corporate records, the over each of the corporation into the academics of the university, interference in the governance of the university, the athletic department essentially being run out of the corporate marketing department of Nike and a general conversion of the university into a model of being run like a business rather than a university.

What is perhaps more disturbing is that Oregon was not merely symptomatic of a problem. It became a model of the solution as the influence of corporations over public universities, and increasingly over private research ones as well, is becoming a national phenomenon. More and more university research is being funded by and the terms of which are therefore dictated by corporations, leaving the research rife with conflicts of interest despite the best efforts of some institutions to avoid them.

Major college athletics now receive significant amounts of funding from apparel companies, as each of Nike (Oregon), Adidas (Louisville) and Under Armour (Maryland) have their flagship schools to which they not only pay hundreds of millions of dollars but test all types of products and marketing campaigns and branding campaigns. There is now a major investigation underway by the FBI and the US Attorney in New York into Adidas influence in college basketball and the paying of recruits to attend certain schools. Expect the scope to widen to include other companies.

This is a valuable book shedding light on what happens when legislatures back away from supporting public higher education. The American public higher education system is one of our nation's Crown Jewels. It is too important and too valuable to be allowed to be turned over to corporations to run.

I was given a copy of this book by Edelweiss and the publisher in exchange for an honest review.

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## **Avid says**

What happens when a state votes to de-fund or underfund its public universities? That is what happened at the University of Oregon, beginning in the mid-'90s. This is a book about the consequences of such short-sightedness and irresponsibility. And it isn't pretty. Unless you're an elite athlete who can take advantage of the exclusive state-of-the-art facilities provided by phil knight, and of an administration who will shield you from the consequences of committing rape, DUI, and other felonies, you are PAYING for the priveleged few who can. And the resulting climate on campus puts female students in particular in danger, and encourages a dishonest, weak, and beholden administration to perpetuate the system. Like jon krakauer's "missoula: rape and the justice system in a college town"(2015), "university of nike" has an important and urgent message for all americans, even the ones who don't attend their specific subject schools. In this case, it's that if the public doesn't support public institutions, corporate america will fill in the gaps, to the exclusive benefit of such corporations' shareholders; public interest be damned.

**Jeff says**

Well written. Disturbing

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