a hallelujah from the cubicles if it sheds light on one of the darkest corners of modern business: the meeting.

The legislation, passed in the aftermath of the Enron scandal and other corporate iniquities to require greater financial disclosure, is forcing company boards to demand justification for "long-unexamined expenditures—very much including meetings," writes John Buchanan, a Georgia journalist and author.

Off-site meetings for sales staff and other groups are a vast and largely untracked area of business expense. For instance, pharmaceutical giant Pfizer was surprised to learn that it was spending as much as $1 billion annually on meetings, not including airfare—twice its estimate.

Meetings in hotels, conference centers, restaurants, and other venues for fewer than 50 people cost corporate America more than $8 billion every year, according to a recent estimate. Large as that sum may seem, one business travel researcher thinks that it represents only about 10 percent of the cost of all off-site corporate gatherings.

Traditionally, industry's meeting planners have been administrative assistants and others who book rooms and flights, decide between surf and turf and chicken for the banquet, and call up the speaker's bureau for the keynote address. Their expenditures could be buried in a host of budgets—marketing, sales, advertising, promotion, or human relations. Meeting planning has been an entrenched, secretive world, Buchanan says. And it is highly resistant to change. The vast majority of CEOs, according to a study, are still clueless about what their companies spend on business powwows.

While there is a trend toward holding virtual gatherings as a way to cut down on the number of people who have to be flown to meetings, housed, and fed, fewer than a third of all meeting planners told researchers they would position themselves as the go-to person for videoconferencing or webcasting. Despite a host of new technologies available to help them, the old hands had scant interest in trying out new ways of matching attendees with relevant courses, vendors, and peers, or facilitating networking or sharing conference content.

Now, cost-conscious companies have reined in the planners, establishing "strategic meeting management programs," which expose meeting staff to an unprecedented level of scrutiny. It's "a brutal form of accelerated evolution," Buchanan says, that may well lead to the extinction of the traditional logistical planner. No longer judged on the quality of the rooms and the wittiness of the speaker, meeting organizers are now evaluated on how good they are at "addressing the underlying business objectives of meetings, then assessing their effectiveness." That's the overarching issue, Buchanan concludes: Are most meetings really necessary? Down in the cubicles, the minions think they already know the answer.

SOCIETY

Mindless Donors

THE SOURCE: "Why Give to a College That Already Has Enough?" by Steve O. Michael, in ***The Chronicle of Higher Education***, July 6, 2007.

Last February, when Jerry Yang, CEO and cofounder of Yahoo, donated $75 million to Stanford University, where he is a trustee, it did little to satisfy Stanford's hunger for money. The university is in the midst of a $4.3 billion fundraising campaign, launched last year *after* it was ranked the top dollar-getter for the academic year 2005–06, having amassed a whopping $911 million. Harvard took in $595 million that year, and Yale $433 million. The total endowments of the three institutions at the top are truly eye-popping: Harvard's stood at $29 billion as of June 2006, Yale's at $18 billion, and hard-driving Stanford's at $14 billion. Yet the dollars just keep coming. Why do philanthropists continue to donate so generously to the institutions that need the money least?

There is a natural tendency to give to one's alma mater, allows Steve O. Michael, vice provost of Kent State University. But "when your alma mater is already fabulously wealthy, it is advisable, indeed wise . . . to adopt other institutions that can yield better returns," just as investors redirect their cash to better-performing stocks. Michael insists that "donations to mega-rich universities do not directly improve the academic experience of their professors and students, or result in any qualitative improvement in student learning." Philanthropic dollars could go a long way toward offsetting the burden higher education places on middle- and lower-class families, especially "when states' appropriations to higher education are declining relative to the cost of tuition." The money would help sustain the diversity, represented by more than 4,000 colleges and universities, that is one of American higher education's great strengths.

Yet according to the Council for Aid to Education, $1.2 billion of last year's $2.4 billion increase in private donations went to the top 10 fundraisers. The process is self-reinforcing, as donations allow the richest institutions to beef up fundraising staffs and encourage them to judge university presidents "less by the academic success of their institutions and more by the size of donations generated under their watch."

In Michael's opinion, donors "should think of where their dollars will make the most difference," places where even small donations would mean that "classrooms can be upgraded, libraries renovated and expanded, and the burden of cost on students alleviated." At such places, unlike at Ivy League schools or other top fundraising universities, donor dollars have the "potential to transform the institution," and fundraising campaigns are "for genuine academic excellence, not merely the growth of the endowment or the ego of the president."

SOCIETY

Hamburger Snobbery

THE SOURCE: "Democracy Versus Distinction: A Study of Omnivorousness in Gourmet Food Writing" by Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann, in ***American Journal of Sociology***, July 2007.

When *Food and Wine* magazine emblazoned a hamburger on its cover in 2004, casual readers might have concluded that food snobbism was dead. Snooty foodies, however, are alive and influential, and eating habits remain an important indicator of social status, write Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann, sociologists at the University of Toronto. The difference is that 50 years ago familiarity with a single culinary tradition—French—identified diners as belonging to the elite. Today, knowledge of ethnic and regional cuisines is as important as the ability to pronounce *au jus* correctly was two generations ago.

The expansion of the high-status food repertoire exemplifies a cultural trend called omnivorousness—eating, or trying, everything—in sociology-speak. The same thing has happened in music. Where it once might have been enough to recognize classical composers, today the status-savvy need an ability to banter about bluegrass pickers and Cuban singers.

As Americans publicly disdain snobbism and embrace meritocracy, the "democratic ideology" of omnivorousness fuels the notion that arbitrary standards of culinary distinction based on a "single, elite French notion of culture are unacceptable." The cuisine of other cultures and classes now gets its due, according to Johnston and Baumann. But anything still does not go. Although a taste for pecorino, a hard cheese made from sheep's milk, marks the palate of a sophisticate, Velveeta, the easy-melting "cheese product," remains verboten. What is the standard?

Based on their study of 102 articles in four leading gourmet magazines in 2004, the authors conclude that food writers judge cuisines by citing authenticity. They legitimize dishes by locating them in Lucknow, India, or Siglufjördur, Iceland, and by stressing their simplicity, their

"I'll start with the arugula-and-goat-cheese salad, and then I'll have the blackened wolf."