

Chapter 22. We Are the University

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History shows that whenever vast empires decline, barbarians appear who threaten and destroy the age's culture, art, and learning. Against this onslaught, there are those who fight at great risk to their own well-being in order to guard and rescue what is to be treasured. We are, once again, in such an age, and our institutions, including those institutions of education, have been under attack for decades.

For these last 50 years, what I call the corporate colonization of higher education in the United States has captured and destroyed authentic academic culture. Our campuses are no longer gathering places where scholars and students dedicate themselves to the rigorous pursuit of learning. Instead, far too many of these spaces have come to closely resemble theme parks for the "college experience"—complete with lazy rivers, climbing walls, state of the art gyms—where both learning and teaching are more performative than real. Armies of administrators with little to no experience in or respect for education or educators now control universities' decisions.

This managerial class has taken over our universities to the extent that they now outnumber faculty on every campus across the nation and are very close to outnumbering the students. Although cleverly concealed by public relations staff and marketing agencies and the glossy logos, branding statements, and brochures they produce, the goal of these functionaries is profit for the corporate university, and the result is poverty for both faculty and students. This poverty finds its expression not only in the unlivable working conditions and compensation of faculty but also in the debt burden of students. It finds expression in a poverty of the mind as well.

Background

Nearly 25 years ago now, I found myself teaching year after year on one-semester, low-wage, single-course contracts. Although my teaching wages were desperately low, I was able to cobble together an income by teaching at multiple universities. My efforts to find a full-time position in academia met with failure, so I continued to work on those humiliating adjunct contracts for years, often teaching courses that were administration-designed, many with some new, nonsensical, "best practices" theory behind them. With common syllabi and pre-ordered book lists, such courses offered little possibility for the kind of sovereignty that the academics of past generations claimed in their classrooms. I felt frustrated and angry

that, after over ten years of graduate work, I was never able to design and teach courses in the areas and disciplines in which I had studied and trained.

This is the reality for those teaching on adjunct contracts. We find ourselves in a kind of edu-factory, working on an academic assembly line, teaching the ever-increasing number of “core” courses that have little to nothing to do with our areas of specialty. Core courses, in fact, have everything to do with the kind of standardization that makes a factory run efficiently; the idea is to make it possible for these courses to be pre-packaged and then taught by nearly anyone. What happens to all the possible courses taught in a more intellectually rigorous, ongoing pursuit of knowledge by all those specially trained scholars? They never happen. The most important work of those scholars is never born. The very reason for the existence of a university is smothered.

That is the state of dysfunction presently found in universities in the United States. The incalculable waste of intellectual training + the mind-numbing sameness of conveyor belt core curriculum = academic fraud and educational malpractice. The sense of failure, of frustration, and of isolation experienced when doing this kind of work often convinces us that our own personal choices are at fault. But this is not a personal failing; we are the majority faculty. Approximately 75 percent of all American faculty is now itinerant. The truth is that what we’ve experienced as lonely and exploited low-wage academic “untouchables” (a phrase borrowed from Pablo Eisenberg) is a widespread and shared suffering.

The plight of the majority of scholars in the US is the result of very intentional actions and impositions put into place in a takeover of academia by corporate interests and business culture. It was a systemic change, a massive shift away from true academic culture, that began with the now infamous Powell Memo of 1971. Hundreds of articles and essays on its devastating effects can be found.

The resulting corporatized universities have been rebuilt on a factory model where the abused and exploited faculty work the conveyor belts on which student after student rolls by—and while far too little is given *to* students, much is extracted *from* them. The truth of the corporatized university is that it operates on the model of vulture capitalism. It extracts, it strip mines, it outsources, it depletes. It sells off what was once a thriving intellectual ecosystem for parts.

When the time came and the majority of faculty members finally, as a growing chorus of voices, attempted to call attention to issues like our labor exploitation, we discovered that there existed already a very effectively painted picture, constructed and depending largely on the “ivory tower, useless professor” myth. The general population too often believed that a professor was someone who worked barely a few hours a week for only thirty weeks a year, then spent the rest of their time at leisure. The general public imagined that faculty members spent hours each day sipping sherry in a well-appointed study or library, reading obscure texts nobody cared about, then giving dinner parties with other erudite but useless professors, where obscure texts were discussed over more sherry. In short, our corporate enemies had gotten to the population before us

and had successfully planted a powerful narrative that was very well-delivered and too often accepted.

The “overpaid, overindulged” intellectual class was painted so well, and mocked so thoroughly, that it was a hard image to dispel in order for us to tell our own truths. Who would care if this class of smug and self-important louts was finally facing its comeuppance? Let them go out into the real world and find real jobs. Then, when this narrative became connected to the lie that all skyrocketing costs of college are tied to the bloated salaries of these loutish do-nothings, how-ever could we successfully expose the deceit?

Raising Awareness

It was about ten years ago that I began with my co-producer, filmmaker Chris LaBree, to record interviews with a variety of faculty members, union representatives, think tank policy makers, and legislators, starting our efforts to put together a documentary about all the issues surrounding corporatized academia in order to raise awareness of what was *really* going on beneath the pretenses that were accepted so easily.

During this decade, it has been my honor to meet some truly amazing people who are working to fight back against the corporate functionaries on our campuses. Chris and I met and spoke with those involved in unionizing efforts—largely with those involved in the United Steelworkers (USW) and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU)—new to the higher education battles. They were passionate about succeeding where the traditional education unions had failed after their many decades of ignoring the growing casualization of faculty labor. I’m sorry to say, however, that in these ten years, with all the earnest unionizing attempts—some still ongoing, some that resulted in unionizing—we have not been able to restore our academic profession.

The same percentage of America’s faculty are still subjected to work on short-term, low wage, adjunct contracts. Most of this “new faculty majority” are still without job security, benefits, and health insurance. Most are still unable to design and teach courses in their academic areas of specialty. And the unionizing efforts have never addressed, nor are they designed to address, the larger issues of the corporatized campus—issues like exploding tuition costs, student debt, corporate partnerships that drive book assignments, or the ways in which our largest financial institutions dictate how financial aid officers are trained to entice students into taking out higher loans than they need. So, beyond the issues of the academic profession, there are many other ways in which the corporate university is out of control. It has become a nearly impregnable predatory institution, a many-headed dragon—and we are fighting with plastic picnic forks. How long can anyone endure in such circumstances?

During these past ten years, a genre of academic literature nicknamed “quit lit” has appeared—stories of those individuals who could finally take the abuse

and poverty no longer and who left academia to find alternative career options. These career options are often called “alt-ac” choices, “alternative” choices when academia becomes untenable. Many took jobs in publishing, in consulting, in tech, in entrepreneurial enterprises. Anything that offered some job security, a steady and respectable paycheck, and an end to the terrors of financial ruin is considered preferable. I am one of those who left.

I’ve known people who took jobs managing clothing boutiques, who bartended, who drove for luxury limousine services. Every one of these people expressed relief and gratitude that they no longer had to lie awake at 3:00 a.m. tasting blood in their mouths, fearing their next electric bill or rent increase. But not one of them would say that they didn’t grieve being forced to give up what felt like a calling. When you are called by love to a profession, your heart and spirit break when you finally admit the truth: that you are being abused by the institution to which you had dedicated so much of yourself and in which you will never have the career your heart still yearns for. And, while every one of these alt-ac jobs is a respectable and honorable form of employment, there is no one sounding the alarm over the loss of those millions of highly trained and extensively educated individuals who are not providing our society with the benefits of those years of study.

I want to declare that, despite the false narrative about our uselessness, academics are an essential class. What we trained for matters. We are a professional class that provides real benefits and that meets real needs. Every healthy, thriving society needs a robust and engaged intellectual class as much as it needs doctors, accountants, or lawyers. We serve not only as teachers, writers, and scholars, but also as the collective of minds made available in service to society at large.

And yet, we’ve become part of what I call the diaspora of the learned. As solitary academic objectors, we are scattered throughout society, exiled and isolated from others of our former profession, unable to fulfill the calling that had been our lives’ goal. Our departures for these alt-ac positions, while essential for our material survival, too often mean we sacrifice our training and education and possible contributions to ongoing academic discovery. Those fruits die on the vine.

Moreover, those quit lit stories of individuals leaving bring us right back to where I started this chapter, to the story I told of my experience 25 years ago—quit lit stories are solitary stories. It is the individual making the difficult choice to leave their chosen profession, to abandon their calling. We are abandoning our calling to those who wish to see academia die.

Yes, the number of those leaving academia continues to rise, but not in a way that alarms the corporatized institution. In fact, our departures increases its strength. When we leave a university as an individual, we are replaced in a heartbeat by another desperate individual willing to endure the abuse that finally drove us away. It reinforces the certainty all corporatized universities have that we are of little value, entirely and easily replaceable.

I received a panicked call at 9:00 one morning from the chair of an English department in one of the several universities for which I taught humanities classes. She wanted to know if I could step into a class that met beginning at noon that day. The person who had been contracted for the course had left abruptly. I asked about the course. Was it an area in which I was experienced, in which I had trained to teach?

“Oh, that doesn’t matter,” she said. “I just need a warm body.”

That was one of the most unveiled, succinct declarations of our worthlessness that I had ever heard. It was also horrifying to realize that the chair of an English department cared not a whit about the quality of the English courses being offered because her goal wasn’t to assure quality of pedagogy or rigorous educational material but to avoid canceling the course and refunding tuition. She had abandoned her loyalty to her discipline and become a functionary of the corporate bosses. But she is not alone.

Anyone working on an adjunct contract bears responsibility for what has happened to our academic culture. Working in the edu-factory places us squarely in collusion with the corporate values, willing or not. And, as necessary as we find it, when we leave as individuals, we fail to end this conveyor belt abuse of faculty and student. There will always be more “warm bodies” who can be shoved in to do your factory work.

Am I saying that we are wrong to depart? Of course not. I’m simply pointing out that our individual departures, my own included, increase the power of the corporatized campus model. I want to declare, therefore, that it is our duty, as the scholars and intellectuals of our country, to act beyond our own self-preservation. It is also our duty to destroy the edu-factory. So, instead of or in addition to our individual departures, I propose we help to plan and execute a mass exodus. I’m not talking about a strike or a walkout or a shutdown. I’m talking about the permanent departure of a majority of faculty members across the entire country.

A mass exodus.

Solutions

Why would a mass exodus of faculty members be the most effective way to respond to the crisis in academia? Because, despite the corporate college’s very carefully maintained illusions, without the scholars, every campus becomes a ghost town overnight. Classrooms sit empty. And those hordes of administrators who have outnumbered both faculty and students on our campuses are suddenly powerless against our permanent absence. We would destroy the corporatized factory campus in a New York minute.

This truth is simple, but powerful: *We are* the university. We carry within us all the necessary experience, learning, training, and abilities required to bring academic pursuits and the intellectual training of our youth back to its fullest and most pure expression.

We are not tethered to the ruins created by these corporate usurpers. Those chains are illusory. We ourselves have made the mistake of believing that our true work lies in the built environment of a campus, now wholly conquered by a hostile culture. Our wars, up to now, have been fought over the wrong property. Our gifts, talents, and abilities don't need real estate. Ours is intellectual property, and we must awaken to that truth—an epiphanic blinding truth—that this has always been ours and will always be ours and that all we have to do, as a large class of extremely gifted people, is walk away and take the ark of truth with us. We ARE the physical embodiment of that ark.

So deep has our misunderstanding been, that even before our individual departures, we lived as exiles within what once we perceived of as our own land, our own sanctified space. For a half century now, we haven't so much labored in these ruined halls and classrooms as we have *haunted* them.

To be clear, I'm not talking about this as a negotiating strategy. The days for negotiations are long, long past. Think about it this way: the American Declaration of Independence acknowledged many previous attempts to negotiate with the British Crown but declared, in this document, that there would be, of necessity, a permanent severing of the bonds—the United States declared itself to be free and independent. THIS is what I'm talking about: a Declaration of Academic Independence and Sovereignty, which should be written and circulated as such. Put another way, when Moses led his people out of Egypt, it was not with the intention of going back if Pharaoh promised better benefits and fewer abuses. It was a march forward.

Yes, in both these examples, the march forward was a march into the unknown, as ours will be. But we don't go alone. We are surrounded by the spirits of those who have refused injustice and abuse through human history. And we don't go empty-handed. We carry with us not only the values and principles and truths of our training but also the highest ideals of our species. We are some of the best-educated people in our country. It is most certainly within our capacity to envision and create new spaces, platforms, and models of higher learning.

That's one of the most important things to keep in mind: this exodus wouldn't be only a march *away* from a captured and ruined culture but also a march *toward* a new, better expression of academic culture in the pursuit of wisdom and the discovery of truths.

The individual flights may have saved us individually. But a mass exodus will save academia itself while simultaneously destroying the corporate colonizer. And, of great importance, it will save our students. Let's return briefly to the story about the English department chair and her search for that "warm body." Her attitude toward the faculty was horrifying enough, of course. But what does it say about her attitude toward the students? If her goal was to put someone, anyone, into the classroom, the primary purpose was the avoidance of canceling the class and losing tuition money.

This is a managerial attitude that sees nothing wrong with taking a student's tuition for a low-quality—or a no-quality—educational experience. In fact, it is preferable to holding out for quality when tuition money is at stake. This, as I have already said, is educational malpractice. It is academic fraud. Our mass departure means that our students will no longer be victims of such fraud and malpractice. Why? Because we, as the living embodiment of the university, will be building and offering new alternatives. WE are the highly preferable alternative.

Finally, our exodus would be for the good of our chosen academic disciplines. Millions of academics over this half century have been prevented from doing their most expansive work in service and support of their disciplines. The continuation of the research, teaching, and writing of scholars in generations past has been halted and silenced by the poverty of the precarious conditions under which we have suffered. A massive departure and the wide, collaborative ways in which we rebuild academic platforms will also provide us with intellectual possibilities long smothered by want of ability, time, and opportunity. We can restore and reinvigorate the work of all disciplines. In other words, our mass departure will save and restore authentic academia.

A saying attributed to George Eliot, “It is never too late to be what you might have been” (qtd. in “George Eliot”), is true, no matter who may have said it. The truth is that we owe it to ourselves, to our disciplines, to academia, and to the youth of our country to be the visionaries that we were always meant to be. We can fulfill all those duties by a mass exodus.

We've spent decades in a struggle against the corporate takeover of our universities. We are never going to win. We will never be able to fight these powers for the full restoration of a true academic culture if we limit ourselves to the current campuses. We will always find ourselves on the collapsing end of a bargaining table. So, let them keep the real estate. It will crumble to dust around them once we depart. One of Buckminster Fuller's most famous quotes is applicable here: “You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete” (qtd. in “Green Wave”). That is our job now: depart *en masse*, declare intellectual liberation for ourselves and our students, and restore the pursuits of the mind and the joys of mental rigor. This will quickly render the edu-factory obsolete. The possibilities here are so vast that we may very well be standing at the beginning of a new Renaissance.

We, the diaspora of the learned, can create something new, something global, in combining traditional, even medieval methods of learning, with tutorial rather than classroom models, with independent study and mentoring and the benefits of technology. Imagine restored intensity and focus, restored rigor, in a more highly individualized pursuit guided by mentors and scholars from around the world.

The possibilities of interdisciplinary, international work done by scholars who have reclaimed sovereignty over their work. . . what could be more dazzling? The kind of learning that could be achieved, the ways in which our youth could be

supported in their own discoveries and epiphanies, the ways the global communities could be brought together and a new world born, all beginning with the liberation of the scholars. . .can you feel the glorious promise of such a new world? Can you see that this is how we defeat the barbarians?

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