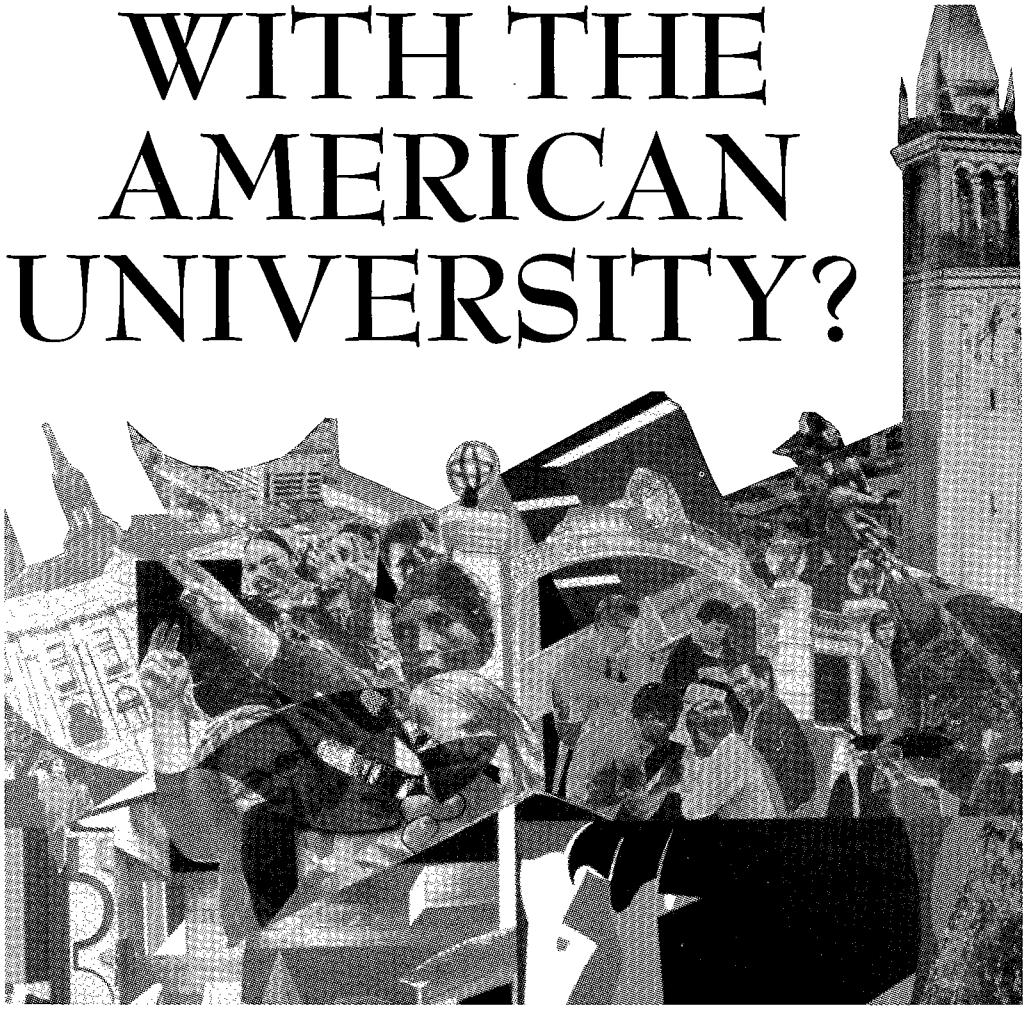
WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY?



Collage by Romare Bearden, Council Chambers, City Hall, Berkeley, California

To outward appearances, the American campus is a cauldron at perpetual boil. Student rebellion in the 1960s and '70s has been followed by debates over multiculturalism and political correctness today. Yet what is most remarkable about higher education during the past half century are the constants: the growth of its scale, scope, and prestige, the steady expansion of academic specialization, the relentless escalation of tuition. Now, our authors warn, this era is drawing to a close. Even as the university tests the limits of its economic and intellectual resources, it seems to have lost sight of its central purposes.

Behind the Curtain

by Chester E. Finn, Jr., and Bruno V. Manno

During the half-century since World War II, American colleges and universities have been education's Emerald City, not only for Americans but for millions of others who have followed the yellow brick road from abroad. No matter what ups and downs have afflicted the economy, no matter that the stunning mediocrity of our primary and secondary schools has been recognized as a national crisis—through all this and more, higher education has grown in scale, in wealth, in allure and, at least until the very recent past, in stature.

That growth has been a marvel to behold. Before World War II, 1,700 institutions enrolled 1.5 million students, employed 147,000 faculty, and spent $675 million, or about $450 per student per year. After the war, the GI Bill of 1944 underwrote a huge expansion, and the postwar economy's appetite for skilled labor placed an ever-greater premium on a college degree. Regional colleges went national. Community colleges—an American innovation—spread like the ivy that seldom graced their walls. Dozens of new (mostly state) campuses were opened.

No longer was the university merely a place of teaching and learning. Now it was an engine of economic growth and a source of technological and scientific progress. It was looked to for defense preparedness, cultural enrichment, and policy ideas about everything from poverty to air pollution. Corporate investment and high-tech jobs gravitated to communities with research facilities and a supply of educated people. By 1960, there were 2,000 institutions; by 1980, 3,150. Still the growth continued. Today, the United States is indisputably the world's postsecondary superpower. There are nearly 3,700 colleges and universities in the United States. They enroll 14.4 million people, about 22 percent of all "tertiary" students on the planet. (The student body includes some 440,000 citizens of other countries, an "export" that adds about $7.1 billion to the plus side of our annual balance of payments.) The faculty has ballooned to 833,000. Higher education in America is a $213 billion industry, roughly equal in size to the gross national product of Belgium.

But it is an increasingly troubled enterprise. Except at the top, it has grave quality problems. Nearly 50 percent of the freshmen in the California state university system are enrolled in remedial English and mathematics classes. Higher education's problems are beginning to receive the attention of government officials at the highest levels of power and influence. Speaker of the House (and ex-professor) Newt Gingrich writes that higher education "is out of control [and] increasingly out of touch with the rest of America."

The American public has always had mixed feelings about the university, sneering at the "ivory tower" life while according the professoriate an exaggerated respect. Now, however, a new combination of factors is tilting the balance of opinion against higher education. While among policymakers there is growing concern about the shoddy quality of much higher education, the broader public feels increasingly oppressed by soaring prices. During the 1980s, health care costs increased 117 percent and there was talk of a national crisis. The price of new cars rose 37 percent. But the average cost of attending a public college increased by 109 percent, and the price of an education at a private college jumped by 146 per-

cent. Every other major purveyor in the United States, from Bethlehem Steel to Wal-Mart, has been forced in recent years to hold down or even cut prices. But higher education has done practically nothing to end its decades-long spree of escalating charges and expenditures.

Today, annual tuition and fees at public four-year institutions equal nine percent of the median American family income; the proportion for private institutions is 38 percent. As recently as 1991, the comparable figures were six percent and 27 percent. (In 1980, they were four percent and 17 percent.) Obviously, this can't continue forever.

One saving grace of the "ivory tower" idea was always the public's sense that, however alien university life might seem to an outsider and however much it might cost, it was redeemed by the higher purposes that informed its existence. But the university is losing that precious public trust. There is a sense, in the mad proliferation of course offerings, the embarrassing deficiencies of many graduates, and higher education's embrace of political correctness and other politically inspired assaults on its own ideals, that perhaps the university has lost sight of its higher purposes. Fifty-four percent of Americans believe that higher education in their state needs a "fundamental overhaul," according to a 1993 poll conducted by the Public Agenda Foundation. By margins of seven or eight to one, the public says that college is not a good value for the money—and is fast pricing itself out of reach.

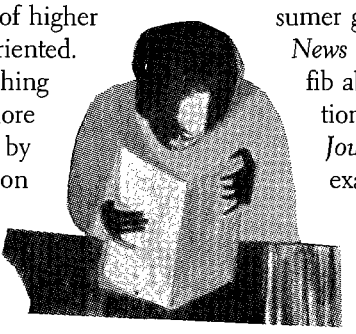
"OH, HIM? HE'S SOME GUY FROM SOUTH BEND IN. LOOKING FOR A WAY TO PAY HIS KIDS' COLLEGE EDUCATION."

It is impossible to underestimate the power of bad ideas, and certainly the looming crisis of the American university has a great deal to do with the institution's profound confusion over its own functions and purposes. More mundane forces are also at work, however, and these have to do with the political economy of modern higher education.

The American university is a curiously inflexible institution. One of its chief peculiarities is that the only changes it can comfortably handle are tied to growth. Colleges and universities are subject neither to the discipline of a true market nor to any powerful internal constraints on spending. They are in a position to define what "higher education" is, and therefore what their costs and prices will be. Consumers have little choice but to pay. Meeting a new student yearning, accommodating a community request, luring a star professor, improving the football team, acceding to the faculty's yen for doctoral students (and reduced teaching loads), pursuing the latest developments in microbiology, strengthening the gender studies program, giving professors incentives for better teaching—you name it—all are treated as incremental costs of education.

If it were a corporation (or even a government agency), the institution would fund many of these changes internally, by cutting back elsewhere. But universities

don't function that way. The combination of tenured faculty, unionized nonteaching staff, protest-prone students, nostalgic alumni, reverence for traditional practices, make-no-waves administrators, remote governing boards, and "collegial" decision making all block that sort of approach.



As a result, the culture of higher education is expansion oriented. Even in this time of crushing tuition costs, colleges are more apt to compete for students by *adding* elaborate recreation centers, dining options, cable television in the dorms, and all manner of new counseling and advising services, rather than by becoming leaner and cheaper. Some call this the "Chivas Regal strategy," boosting sales by marketing one's product as the premium brand.

Whatever it's called, the economics of higher education often seem surreal. The late Howard Bowen, perhaps the leading analyst of the economics of universities, concluded that these institutions simply spend all they can take in. They determine their own costs. They set their own prices—and sometimes collude over them. They are more likely to buff their appeal by raising prices than by slashing them. They aren't really answerable to anyone for their performance. Indeed, they have no clear goals or measurable indicators of effectiveness. They insist that what they teach cannot be tested by outsiders, demand that the work of scholars be evaluated only by their peers, and use academic freedom as a shield against scrutiny and accountability.

Thus constructed, higher education is a perpetual growth machine. Such a machine requires a steady flow of new revenues. Since enrollments produce the lion's share of income (except at a handful of research-centered campuses), attracting more students and charging more for each one are the surest ways to get it. Thus, the average U.S. postsecondary institution enrolled 535 more students in 1993 than in 1974.

Once a university grows, it must maintain its new base. Above all, it must keep its lecture halls and dorms full. Admissions offices today will do almost anything to attract enough students: discount tuition charges, scramble to boost the school's rank in consumer guides such as the annual *U.S. News and World Report* ratings, even fib about the quality of their institution's students. The *Wall Street Journal* recently reported, for example, that for years New College of the University of South Florida deliberately inflated the average SAT scores of its entering class by simply lopping off data on its poorest performers.

The imperative of keeping enrollments up is a powerful contributor to the quality problems that beset the American campus. Seen from afar, the Emerald City's tallest academic pinnacles still gleam. Nobody is really surprised that nearly half of the Nobel laureates in physics and medicine since World War II have been members of American faculties, as have two-thirds of those in economics. This distinction spills over into graduate education in the arts and sciences and extends to major professional schools such as medicine. But intellectual rigor can fall off drastically even at the postgraduate level. Upward of 90,000 master's degrees in education are awarded each year, for example, including 60 (in 1993) in driver education and 3,000 in physical education and coaching. These (and many of the 7,000 education doctorates conferred each year) have more to do with the credentialism of American public schools than with higher learning.

At the undergraduate level, the problems are much the same. While yuppie parents will do anything to get their offspring into Brown or Berkeley, their impulse has more to do with careerism and status than with academic quality. It is true that a

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degree from such an institution is a marketable asset; it is not altogether clear that students learn a lot—at least academically—during their time on campus. Thus the familiar joke about why Harvard is a great repository of knowledge: its students enter with so much and leave with so little.

Descending from the institutions whose names are household words to those attended by the great majority of American students, the deficiencies become painfully apparent. The recruitment and admission of ill-prepared students is common, though often justified in the name of diversity and social justice. Many schools try to "remediate" underperformers on campus. Others turn a blind eye and pass them along with a degree. Remedial courses in reading, writing, and math are offered on 75 percent of U.S. campuses, and 30 percent of entering students enroll in at least one such course. (Even at MIT, which has no shortage of attractive applicants, only 17 percent of freshmen passed the entry-level writing appraisal in 1995.)

Many degree recipients never get near a history, math, or literature course. More than half avoid instruction in foreign languages. As a result of student demand for vocational courses and institutions' need to keep classrooms filled, the liberal arts are being pushed aside. Barely a third of 1993 bachelor's degrees were in the arts and sciences. Degrees in home economics outnumbered those in mathematics; more baccalaureates were awarded in "protective services" than in the physical sciences, more in theater than in German and French combined.

Rather than add stimulating courses in math, literature, and other elements of a classic liberal education, administrators and faculty have pandered to some of the worst impulses of students, encouraging (and sometimes requiring) them to take "courses" that indulge the contemporary trend toward self-absorption. At the University of Maryland, freshmen earn credits for a "course" called "The Student and the University," which examines such matters as date rape, cultural diversity, the use of highlighting pens, and fitting a career plan to the contours of one's personality. At Florida A&M, there are seminars on dating relationships. "American higher education," concludes the Wingspread Group, a panel chaired by former U.S. secretary of labor William Brock, "now offers a smorgasbord of fanciful courses in a fragmented curriculum that accords as much credit for 'Introduction to Tennis' . . . as it does for 'Principles of English Composition,' history or physics, thereby trivializing education—indeed, misleading students by implying that they are receiving the education they need for life when they are not."

To keep the customers moving, moreover, U.S. colleges and universities have been willing to confer degrees on people who have not learned much. A 1993 federal survey found that few graduates of four-year campuses reached the highest level of literacy—which involved such things as interpreting a substantial news article. Only about half were capable of writing a brief letter explaining an error made on a credit card bill. Some of the particulars would be funny if they weren't so alarming. As the Wingspread Group noted, "56.3 percent of American-born, four-year college graduates are unable consistently to perform simple tasks, such as calculating the change from $3 after buying a 60-cent bowl of soup and a $1.95 sandwich."

Besides increasing the number of students, the obvious way to boost university revenues is to raise the fees collected from each of them. Every autumn brings word that tuition increases have again outpaced inflation. The 1995–96 school year brought with it a six percent increase—about double the inflation rate—at four-year schools, pushing tuition and fees to an average of $2,860 at public campuses and $12,432 at private ones. At Ivy League-style universities, the price of a bachelor's degree (including room and board) approaches $120,000. In most of the country, one can buy a substantial house for that kind of money.

It is important to note, however, that in the peculiar world of higher education finance, tuition charges both understate and overstate the actual cost of a college education. They understate it because vir-

The Digital Challenge

The first reports from the front lines of higher education on the information superhighway are coming in. What will we do on the superhighway? What happens to higher education when every student has a link to a flood of words and images of every imaginable kind from around the world, and when every teacher and every student can reach out to each other at all hours of the day and night?

The tools are already in hand to make transformative change—and I would not have said that as recently as 1993. We can make some good surmises about technologies that are coming to help us further, but even if we have only the PC and the Internet, we have enough to revolutionize education. We can create teaching tools interactive enough to let students seek them out and work with them at their own pace. Imagine an on-line resource where the course lectures are available not in 50-minute chunks but in two-to-five-minute video segments closely matched to a paragraph of the textbook and a video of an expensive-to-duplicate demonstration, with problem sets right at hand. How much better to review the lecture from the professor's mouth as often as need be, rather than attempt to decipher scrawled and perhaps incomplete or inaccurate notes.

The same tactic can be used at an altogether different level. Infrequently taught ancient and medieval languages (e.g., ancient Syriac, medieval Occitan) are in danger of disappearing from study. Even where faculty have the skill to teach them, they are often not given the time to do so in their normal teaching load, while many institutions have no qualified faculty for many such languages. If self-paced interactive instruction, with abundant drills and exercises, were available on-line world-wide (there is no *technical* obstacle to such a thing today), a local faculty member could monitor a student's progress at the outset and spend face-to-face time six months or a year later taking the successful student to the next level—a luxury that few have today.

Such resource-based learning is especially powerful for "distance learners" of all kinds. I have taught Internet-based seminars on Augustine and on Boethius with hundreds of auditors from around the world and now even paying customers are getting credits from my university for rigorous work carried on far from Philadelphia.

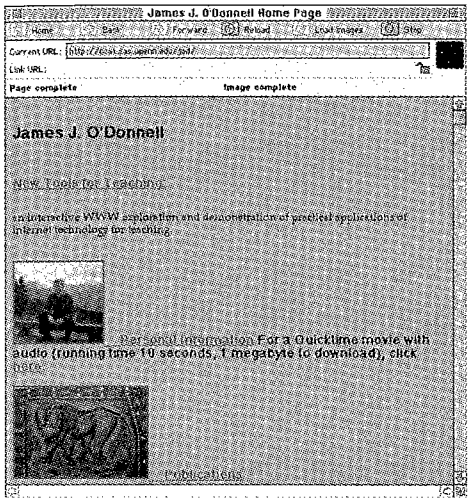
There are special advantages for an arduous discipline such as classics. The secondary school Latin teachers of America work often with little contact with one another or with the academy, and they are too few and too scattered to justify classroom-based course work that can reach more than a fraction of them. But in the aggregate, the Latin teachers of America are more motivated and better qualified to take advanced work than our regular undergraduates. If we can deliver high quality instruction to them reliably via the electronic networks, we do ourselves a favor (more students), we do them a favor (re-energizing and re-directing their teaching), and so we do our profession a favor (building from the school level up), and whatever benefit the study of the ancient languages confers on society as a whole is measurably increased. And somehow—perhaps this is the most important point of all, the joy and the wonder of it all—the magic of education at its best spreads farther and deeper across the land.

To be sure, no one should try to substitute this kind of teaching for the old vision of Mark Hopkins on one end of the log and the student on the other. Technology can be dehumanizing and distancing. But we need to be more honest with ourselves in higher education than we customarily are about this.

tually every institution also draws substantial revenues from other sources. The average private campus now spends $28,000 annually per (full-time equivalent) student, more than twice its posted charge for an undergraduate education. Yet the tuition levels that make headlines also exaggerate what most students actually pay for higher education, particularly in the private sector. In a year (1989) when the

Too much of what transpires in higher education is already dehumanizing and distancing. Stringencies of economics and defects of human character already subject our students to huge lectures, novice teaching assistants, itinerant part-time lecturers, and other makeshifts. Where the ideal relationship between teacher and pupil exists, we might be tempted to think of strengthening it but should not try to supplant it. But there is more than enough imperfection in our endeavors to provide ample opportunity to apply our new tools to give education a more human face. (Can we imagine universities without lectures? Will we one day notice that the extended monologue is a form of discourse now practiced most often by professors and madmen?)

The professor is no longer what he was in the days when the university embodied all studies in a single location. The university was once a microcosm, a miniature world offering the whole of knowledge in a restricted arena. Every discipline represented had its professor, the supreme local authority on the subject. That supremacy faded long ago, and students found more ways to learn about their subject than to sit and listen to the local professor.



The real roles of the professor in an information-rich world will be not to provide information but to guide and encourage students wading through deep waters of the information flood. Professors in this environment will thrive as mentors. They will use the best skills they have now to nudge students through the educationally crucial tasks of *processing* information: problem-solving, analysis, and synthesis of ideas—the activities on which our time can best be spent. The professor will also be a point of contact to the world beyond the campus, a kind of software "icon"—click on the professor and let him take you to the world that he knows. This may seem an absurd image, but it can take shape already on a screen of the World Wide Web.

There is no doubt that our future, like every future, will take as well as give. There are things we cherish about the face-to-face intimacy of our institutions that we will lose. But we regularly sacrifice intimacy to achieve freedom or power, and we have made such choices in one form or another for centuries. Every technology of the word from the invention of writing to the present has given those who use it new range and power and intimacy of one kind, but dissolved a little further the physical bonds of face-to-face community.

If we need a monument to error in facing new technologies, we need only look around us. If the railroads of the 1950s had known they were in the transportation business, the joke goes, more of them would still be in business. If we think we are in the 50-minute lecture business, we may still be in that business 40 years from now, but there will not be as many of us, the paint will be peeling from the walls, and the dormitories and lecture halls will be far quieter and more tranquil—not to say empty—places.

—James J. O'Donnell

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average "sticker price" of U.S. private universities was $11,735, tuition revenue per student averaged $9,071, some 23 percent less. That difference represented widespread discounting, undertaken partly in the name of equal opportunity but increasingly in an effort to draw in enough students to fill those classrooms and dorms. One veteran analyst of higher education finances compares the way colleges "sell"

student places to airline marketing practices—i.e. filling the available seats with people who pay sharply differing prices.

Tufts University, for example, which now charges $21,000 annually for tuition and fees (and $6,000 more for room and board), aids 40 percent of its students, with sums averaging $15,000 each. The 60 percent who pay full price, of course, help underwrite this Robin Hood-style resource transfer. But the bazaar-style pricing policy breeds further unhappiness among consumers, both those forced to pay the full freight and those who sense they could have gotten a better "deal" if they had shopped longer or bargained harder.

Rising tuition and fees are still the overriding reality, and it is extraordinary how long they have been growing. Terry Hartle of the American Council on Education, higher education's top Washington lobbyist, estimates that college charges have risen by an average of two percent more than inflation throughout the 20th century. Yet the demand for higher education has remained strong. Most of its appeal stems from the sizable economic payoff of a college education—although the opportunity it provides for a prolonged spell of unbridled hedonism ought not to be ignored. In the age group 25 to 34, men with college degrees earned $12,000 more in 1994 than those who ended their education with a high school diploma. Women with degrees enjoyed an income premium of $13,000.

Over the course of a career, according to U.S. Census Bureau projections, a person who graduated from college in 1992 can expect $600,000 more income (in constant dollars) than a person of the same age with only a high school diploma. A master's degree adds nearly $200,000 more to lifetime earnings. And unemployment is much lower for college graduates.

Lately, however, a bit of the economic bloom seems to have faded. Real median earnings of young male college graduates actually dropped 4.4 percent from 1989 to '93. Although the earnings of those with no college plunged further (13.7 percent), the "return" on an investment in college may have peaked, at least for men. (It continues to rise for women.)

In a country where high school diplomas mean next to nothing, it is possible that employers have been using the college degree as a simple screening device to identify people likely to possess at least minimal skills and work habits. As access to college becomes nearly universal, however, as low university standards are exposed, and as more radical school-reform strategies start to bear fruit at the secondary level, it is likely that the degree's economic edge will narrow.

Amid all these growing signs of educational degradation, life on campus has grown more pleasant for those who live and work there. Between 1976 and 1991, a period when most other enterprises were slashing middle management and substituting technology for labor, the university continued to add poundage. By 1991, there were only 8.3 students per (professional) staff member, compared to 9.8 in 1976.

Salaries are comfortable. The average full professor at a state university earned $62,000 in 1994–95 for what is typically an eight- or nine-month year. At private universities, full professors averaged $73,160. Even at lower-status two-year colleges, the typical professor drew a salary of $51,070. Moreover, some 64 percent of the nation's full-time faculty enjoy the extraordinary job security that comes with tenure.

Course loads have fallen and school years have shrunk. Instruction now consumes only 40 percent of the average university budget. Senior faculty typically spend about 10 hours a week in the classroom and no more than eight hours advising students, according to a study by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles. Michigan State's 2,038 professors (a tenth of whom earn more than $100,000 a year) spend an average of 5.5 hours a week in the classroom during the academic year. That presumably leaves ample time for research and writing. Yet the UCLA study also shows that, from 1991 to '93, 41 percent of American professors published not a single word in professional journals. (Others are more prolific, raising the average output for full-time faculty to about one article, a third of a book review, and two "professional pre-

sentations" every year.)

Despite a hundred solemn studies urging that faculty pay be tied more to teaching and less to research, the "publish or perish" imperative endures. A federal survey found that professors' publications correlate positively with their earnings but that teaching has an *inverse* relationship. Faculty whose teaching made up less than half their total work load earned far more ($62,000) in 1988 than those who spent most of their time in the classroom ($41,000).

On many campuses, political activism has yielded to politicization—of the curriculum, faculty hiring, and other university matters.

The consequences are predictable: slipshod instruction, particularly of undergraduate students; constant pressure from faculty for less teaching and more time for research; and tons of research that serves the career needs of the professoriate (and bloats budgets) without significantly enlarging human knowledge. More than 400 new scholarly journals in modern languages and literature, most of them obscure and some bordering on the frivolous, were founded in the 1970s alone. Hundreds of so-called "electronic journals" are also appearing each year.

Many observers predicted that this peculiar industry would suffer a shakeout during the 1980s, but it escaped. National prosperity underwrote increases in enrollment, tuition, and subsidies from state governments. A vibrant stock market boosted endowment returns and encouraged alumni giving. And the federal government chipped in with the Middle Income Student Assistance Act of 1978, which broadened eligibility for federal grants and extended loans to students regardless of financial need. This led to unprecedented increases in student aid. Total aid (from all sources) ballooned to $46.8 billion in 1994-95. The federal taxpayer supplied or—by guaranteeing loans—backstopped three-quarters of this sum. Today, nearly half of all students pay for college and graduate school with Washington's help.

There are, however, several reasons to believe that higher education's day of reckoning can no longer be put off. First, there just are not many more students waiting to be recruited. Postsecondary institutions increased enrollments in the past by opening their doors to older students, encouraging people to return for additional training, and recruiting overseas. But like veins of coal that have been mined for decades, these "nontraditional" populations will eventually provide dwindling yields. There are now more students enrolled in colleges and universities than in high schools.

Moreover, there is widening recognition of the pernicious effects of "open admissions" at the postsecondary level on school standards and pupil performance in secondary schools. Only about 50 of the nation's 3,600 colleges and universities are highly selective, turning away more applicants than they accept. Perhaps 200 more campuses admit 50 to 90 percent of their applicants. The rest, desperate to fill their classrooms, welcome essentially anyone who applies, sometimes not even requiring a high school diploma. Young people there-

fore are well aware that they can get into college no matter what their transcripts and test scores look like. For them, the incentive to study hard in high school is virtually nonexistent. School reformers can talk about raising standards until they turn blue; rational 16-year-olds know that in their "real world" it simply doesn't matter.

This unpleasant reality is contributing to changes that may make life more difficult for universities. The California state university system is on the verge of barring entry by freshmen who cannot handle college-level math or English. (Three-fifths of new students now fail one or both of the tests.) The City University of New York and the state universities of Massachusetts are moving in the same direction.

Elected officials are also beginning to put pressure on state universities. "The higher education community thinks they're above it all. They don't like to be told what to do," says Ohio legislator Wayne Jones, a senior member of his state assembly's finance committee. "But if they want us to be their sugar daddy, there are going to be some rules." Jones has successfully pressed his colleagues to impose some. Ohio now requires professors in state-supported colleges to spend at least 10 percent more time teaching undergraduates than they did in 1990.

Most ominous of all for universities, money is getting scarce—and consumers and taxpayers more cost conscious. Though state funds for higher education continue to increase in absolute terms, appropriations per student, adjusted for inflation, have dropped. Yet institutional spending is still rising faster than inflation, forcing state universities to increase tuition rapidly. The federal gravy train is no longer a reliable source of income, either. Washington supplied 15 percent of higher education revenues in 1980 and only 12 percent in 1993, and the drive to shrink the federal deficit, curb Uncle Sam's intrusiveness, devolve obligations to states, and make people shoulder greater responsibility for themselves has only begun.

Some of the least popular agencies in Washington—the Department of Education, the national endowments for the arts and humanities—have been the spigots through which much of higher education's federal largesse has flowed. As their budgets are nipped and their programs curbed, universities will feel it. So will students. Budget savings now being exacted from federal loan programs, for example, will boost the cost of borrowing, thereby making hundreds of thousands of students even more keenly aware of—and harder pressed to afford—the price of higher education. The level of federal scientific research support is rising more slowly than inflation at many agencies. Even the reduction in defense spending—a goal dear to the ideological hearts of many academics—is apt to affect university budgets. (One large exception: federal dollars still gush into biomedical research.)

If neither state nor federal government will come to the academy's financial rescue, its one remaining large source of additional funding is, of course, its own students. But tuition payers are also growing more oppressed by—and resistant to—rising prices. Because many people nowadays simply cannot pay for college out of current income, the debt burden is mounting fast. Between 1992—when Congress invited even more middle- and upper-income students to obtain federally guaranteed loans—and 1994, borrowing under the federal loan programs rose 57 percent. Students typically emerge from college with a debt burden of $8,000 or $9,000, and horror stories—families that owe $50,000 after putting two or three youngsters through school—are often heard. What is more, the prospect of hefty monthly payments after college intensifies the pressure on students to major in "practical" fields, thus exacerbating the vocationalism that already afflicts higher education.

In response to all of these challenges, a little belt-tightening has begun. Mostly, administrators do the easy (sometimes shortsighted) things first. They hand out more tuition discounts to maintain enrollments. (On the margin, a student doesn't have to produce a great deal of net income in order to be more valuable to the institution than an empty slot.) They defer maintenance on aging buildings. They may meet new teach-

ing needs with untenured and low-paid part-time or "gypsy" faculty members.

State legislatures are forcing some changes through budget cuts and efforts to mold university behavior. Ohio's mandatory increase in undergraduate teaching is being emulated by other states, as is Tennessee's practice of tying a small portion of its campus funding formula to institutional performance. Signs of entrepreneurialism are also visible, at least in realms where the faculty is not directly affected. Colleges are contracting out the management of such things as bookstores, dormitories, and janitorial work. A few are even turning the Chivas Regal strategy on its head and offering bargains. The University of Rochester now gives an across-the-board $5,000 discount to incoming freshmen from New York State.

Controlling costs—and prices—is plainly vital if American higher education is to get itself into shape, but a proper fitness regimen must go further. There is a long list of possibilities, from making campus amenities optional, so that budget-conscious students can buy the academic equivalent of "basic transportation" rather than the "fully-loaded" model, to imposing real assessments on students so that academic "value added" can be measured (and compared by quality-minded shoppers). The curricular smorgasbord needs to be edited and more "core" requirements instituted; faculties need better incentives to emphasize teaching rather than ersatz research. (How many of today's 833,000 faculty will ever produce "new knowledge" of real significance? Ten percent?) This list could be extended.

But fiscal fitness is not all that U.S. higher education needs to work at. It must renew its moral authority. Particularly if the economic advantage of a degree shrinks, the university's future stature and allure will have more to do with the intrinsic worth of what it does—as perceived by ordinary people, not just by academics—and less to do with the personal wealth to be reaped by enduring the process.

Moral capital is not easy to build. It seems to us that the most promising ways by which higher education can regain public trust are by committing itself to the principle of value for money, demonstrating that a college degree truly denotes solid skills and knowledge, and curbing the excesses of political correctness and campus misbehavior.

Are these dreams like the Cowardly Lion's wish for courage and Dorothy's desire to get back to Kansas? Perhaps. But just as the lion and Dorothy turned out to contain within themselves the essential elements for realizing their hopes, so American higher education has residual strengths that it can tap in a quest for self-renewal.

There are on a few campuses trustees and presidents who are showing signs of reform leadership, and several reform-minded groups have been formed, including the Wingspread Group, the American Academy for Liberal Education (a new accrediting body), and the National Association of Scholars. Inner resources may not suffice, however, unless accompanied by an external shock. Perhaps this will be supplied by restive taxpayers, rebellious tuition payers, change-minded voters, and the demands of employers who need to hire truly educated people if their firms—and the nation's economy—are to remain strong.

Will that be shock enough? We would have greater confidence if state and national leaders were to become as serious about the performance of universities as they are about that of the primary and secondary schools, where bold changes are finally being made in basic ground rules and operating assumptions. This has not yet happened at the tertiary level, but the new crew of legislators, members of Congress, and governors—people who do not share the hoary assumptions or political ties of their predecessors—do show signs that they are prepared to open the curtain and see what the higher education wizard really looks like.

There is risk, to be sure, that something of value may be lost in the process of reforming higher education. But leaving the enterprise as it is carries greater risks. The changes may not make all our wishes come true, but we might at least find American higher education pointed, like Dorothy and Toto, back to the real world.

The Feudal Culture of the Postmodern University

by Alan Wolfe

The corporation is downsizing and going international. Government is being reinvented, even disinvented. Unions are disappearing. Churches are turning themselves into spiritual shopping malls, offering something for everyone. The family has fractured or recombined. Radical change is the order of the day in the life of American institutions—except in academia. While other institutions tangle with whirlwinds, the university seems to be sailing along, impervious to the forces buffeting the rest of society. The institution run by and for a group that has been dubbed the "tenured radicals" may be the most conservative institution in American society.

The last revolution to hit the American university was the one that brought the faculty to power half a century and more ago. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, note sociologists Christopher Jencks and David Riesman in *The Academic Revolution*, professors were pitted against university presidents and trustees in assorted campus battles over such matters as "the shape of the curriculum, the content of particular courses, or the use of particular books. The professors . . . lost most of the publicized battles, but they won the war." Their victory was sealed in the aftermath of World War II by the rapid growth of federal research grants, which made faculty members independent revenue raisers.

As the faculty took control, they established their own criteria for how higher education would operate: academic institutions would be meritocratic, national, secular, and professional. (The modern university, Jencks and Riesman add, also played a powerful role in spreading the meritocratic idea through the rest of American society.) Despite student protests, controversies over race-based admissions, efforts to rethink the role of religion in the public sphere, the tax revolt, and the shrinkage of the middle class, faculty control of the university has remained remarkably intact since Jencks and Riesman wrote their book.

To be sure, the higher education landscape is far from uniform. Faculty control varies with the status of the institution. Elite universities—the Ivies, the California Institute of Technology, Stanford, a few state universities, and about two dozen others—have little in common with Anne Arundel Community College, Hamline University, or Oklahoma Baptist University. When faculty members can make good on a threat to move elsewhere if their demands are ignored, they have considerably more power than when state legislators regard them as public employees little different from file clerks.

Some 833,000 people teach full or part-time at American institutions of higher learning, but only a minority enjoy the privilege of controlling their professional lives. Burton R. Clark, a higher education specialist at the University of California, Los Angeles, estimates in *Higher Learning in*

William Hogarth's Scholars at a Lecture *(1736)*

America that more than two-thirds of all professors teach in non-doctorate–granting institutions, including community colleges.

Still, at the top research universities virtually all challengers have withdrawn from the competition for control. Students, despite occasional flare-ups over political correctness and other matters, are politically quiescent, although one can hear rumblings around minority concerns. Trustees have demonstrated little interest in reasserting their authority. They believe that their obligation is to choose a president, give him or her occasional advice and money, and avoid "micromanagement" at all costs. Presidents, in the words of Donald Kennedy, who held that post at Stanford University from 1980 to '92, "are running for office every day." Needing to please everyone, they have scant incentive to confront faculty power, he notes in *Higher Education Under Fire*. The administration oversees admissions and erects buildings; the faculty retain authority over everything else that matters to them—tenure decisions, teaching loads, the lot.

Critics of the university have no doubt that faculty control is directly responsible for the institution's ills. During the 1960s, conservatives defended higher education against the attacks of the New Left. Now they delight in barbed criticism. Charles Sykes's *ProfScam* sums up the conservative

indictment. Professors are ripping off everyone else. They should teach more. Their English should be understandable. Their research should be less esoteric. They ought to spend more time with undergraduates. They should be in their offices more often. It is absurd that they get off one year in seven for sabbaticals. They should keep their politics out of the classroom and their hands off their students. (Yes, Sykes has three pages on sexual harassment, and they are charged with righteous feminist indignation.) "Almost single-handedly," he declares, "the professors—working steadily and systematically—have destroyed the university as a center of learning and have desolated higher education."

Many of Sykes's complaints are echoed in *Impostors in the Temple* by Martin Anderson, an economist and former Reagan administration official who is now a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution. He is especially fond of the word *corruption*. Professors are politically corrupt because they do not like Republicans. They are personally corrupt because they engage in hanky-panky with students. Administrators are corrupt because they exaggerate overhead costs and build expensive football facilities.

Conservatives are equally clear about who is responsible for the decline of the canon and what they see as the general degradation of the curriculum. Reviewing Stanford's controversial decision in the spring of 1988 to drop a Western culture course requirement attacked as racist—Jesse Jackson joined a crowd chanting, "Hey hey, ho ho, Western culture's got to go"—critic Roger Kimball writes in *Tenured Radicals* that "the faculty was, in the end, to blame for the demise of the Western culture course at Stanford."

Even the speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives has weighed in. "Campuses are run for the benefit of the faculty, not the students," declares ex-professor Newt Gingrich. "College and university faculties have developed a game in which they have lots of petty power with very little accountability."

If the Right attacks, the Left must perforce defend. During the 1960s, the Left attacked the "multiversity" for its "irrelevance" and its impersonal "processing" of students. Now listen to Cary Nelson and Michael Bérubé, the editors of *Higher Education under Fire* and self-described "loyal, card carrying" leftists who teach English at the University of Illinois. Those mass lecture courses, once the target of the Left's criticism, now "have their place even in the humanities." As for criticisms of the esoteric theory so popular in English departments, "the public does not understand that knowledge in the humanities must be produced as well as transmitted." Faculty stagnation? Nelson and Bérubé do admit—unlike some of their colleagues—that something is wrong. But they insist that it "is not the same thing as the so-called 'deadwood' problem."

In the same volume, Ernest Benjamin, general secretary of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the professional organization of the American professoriate, brushes off several other challenges to the status quo. "Elimination of tenure . . . will not increase the number of available positions," he writes. "Nor can we improve teaching by increasing teaching loads."

The university's defenders believe that the public has been fed inaccurate ideas about what goes on within its walls. The task is not to change the institution, writes AAUP president Linda Ray Platt, a professor of English at the University of Nebraska and another contributor to the Nelson and Bérubé book, but to "develop a new narrative of our own and find ways to carry it to the public."

The university's critics and defenders are both at least partly right. As Nelson and Bérubé suggest, there is nothing inherently wrong with the idea that faculty have a responsibility to uncover new knowledge and to convey the results of their

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Charles Sykes, *ProfScam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education* (Regnery Gateway, 1988)

findings to those few others who work at the margins of the knowable, even if the price is scholarship that is difficult for a lay person to understand. Students, especially motivated students interested in exploring uncharted territory, benefit when scholars undertake such work. Nor is there anything wrong in theory with the notion that the responsibility of uncovering new knowledge gives academics a greater stake in governing themselves than most other groups in American society have.

Yet precisely because academics have special obligations, their failure to govern themselves *well* is special cause for concern. If we look at how faculties actually do act, as opposed to how they ought to, the Left's defense reveals as many weaknesses as the Right's attack.

Exactly which new "narrative" about what's actually occurring on campus, one wants to ask Linda Ray Platt, should be offered the public? Surely not the one given by one of her predecessors at the AAUP, University of Texas law professor Julius Getman. His account of faculty conduct in *In the Company of Scholars* is highly unflattering, and all the more damning

because Getman loves the academic life and has a clear-eyed appreciation of its promise. "Debate at faculty meetings," he writes, "often resembles one-on-one schoolyard basketball more than it does serious academic discussion." The gravest responsibilities seem to elicit the worst behavior. "On almost all faculties," Getman says, "the most competitive, emotion-laden, acrimonious, lengthy, and pretentious debates are about faculty appointments."

The problem, in short, is not that professors are free to run their own affairs. It is that they do so badly. Self-governance ought to encourage responsibility, but in practice self-governance often becomes nongovernance. Professors use the language of academic freedom to rationalize their inability to make hard decisions, take unpopular actions, or police their own conduct.

II.

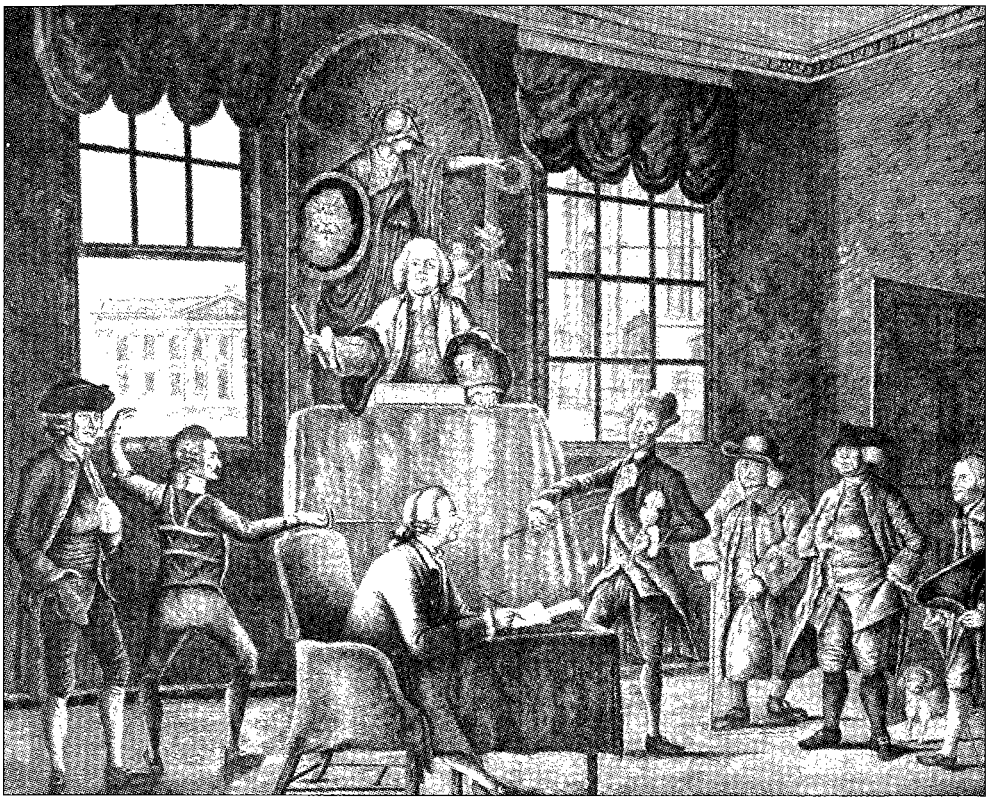
Two features of the American research university help explain the failures of faculty self-governance. The first is its highly decentralized structure. In *The Research University in a Time of Discontent*, Steven Muller, former president of Johns Hopkins University, calls this the "holding company governance" model. All units of the university—including the colleges and individual departments—are treated, as college presidents like to say, as tubs on their own bottom. This structure is a product of the rise of the financially autonomous professional schools in law, medicine, and engineering. In the swollen and ungovernable "megasized" research university, each division comes to resemble the professional school: it taps into a market, provides a service, and charges what the market will bear. Under this arrangement, Muller points out, the arts and sciences are no longer at the center of the university, either financially or intellectually. In fact, nothing is.

So organized, the university is not an entity with a common purpose, or at least organized around a system-defining core. It is a set of linked fiefdoms that find temporary advantage in belonging to a larger organization. Charles Anderson, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, rightly says that it ought to be the purpose of the university "to prescribe a program for the life of the mind." But that is not the purpose of the university today. It is not too much to say that the late-20th-century university, as a corporate entity, has no purpose.

Even the fiefdoms that operate within it have limited power. Authority is concentrated not in the units of the system but in the hands of individuals. *Bureaucracy* is a word students frequently spit at the university, but as David Damrosch, a professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, points out in *We Scholars*, it is anything but that. A bureaucracy is rationally organized from top to bottom. In the university—in Columbia's case a $1 billion enterprise—there is little power at the top, among the trustees and president, and even less among vice presidents, deans, and other middle managers. The very things they are expected to manage, such as the costs of hiring faculty or the rationale for the curriculum, are largely beyond their control.

Even departments, which organize the curriculum and hire the faculty, rarely operate as independent centers of authority. Authority flows all the way down to the professors, each of whom acts as an individual entrepreneur. Each chooses his own research agenda, develops his own teaching schedule, plans his own day, and decides his own level of involvement with the management of his institution.

This does not necessarily result in a lean central administration. At most universities, the administration has expanded greatly, in part to produce reports demanded by the federal government, but also because an antibureaucracy requires more, not fewer, checks and oversights from the center, particularly on students. Anarchy at the bottom is linked to autocracy at the top. Presidents try to gather power where they may. Damrosch quotes a study of the college presidency, *Leadership and Ambiguity*, which concludes that "the latent absurdity of being the executive leader of an organization that does not know what it is doing haunts the presiden-



Bunbury of Clare's A School of Athens, *after T. Orde (1773)*

tial role." Presidents fill their schedules with "frequent reminders of the fact that one *is* the president, the attention to minor things one *can* do."

Besides decentralization, the second distinctive feature of university organization is tenure—a privilege enjoyed by about two-thirds of full-time academics in the United States. The product of a long struggle to protect academic freedom, tenure in the form we know it—a seven-year apprenticeship, formal rules of candidacy, faculty origination of the case—was not solidly established until 1940. Tenure assumes an inevitable clash between the profane concerns of ordinary life (money, influence, political interests, getting by) and the sacred nature of intellectual inquiry. It operates on the theory that society needs the ideas that academics produce but cannot trust itself to allow academics to produce them.

Rather than enter into the separate debates over decentralization and tenure, it pays to consider how the two work at cross-purposes. Take a system organized as a series of turfs designed to maximize self-interest, then add job protection for life, and the result can hardly help but be perverse. It has produced a faculty culture shaped not by anything like the "postmodernism" so vigorously championed in the university's humanities departments but by distinctly premodern norms and codes of behavior. The postmodern university has a feudal faculty culture, a system based on the principle of protecting the autonomy of independent guilds, surrounded by a consensus to do nothing lest the entire structure collapse.

There are other institutions that offer tenure. The civil service comes to mind. But civil service bureaucracies are just that: bureaucracies. There is job security, but there is also direction from the top and clear lines of authority. Other institutions combine decentralization and self-interested individualism. Mutual fund managers work for investment companies but operate within them as individual entrepreneurs. The modern corporation in general is rapidly copying this model. But such organizations have nothing resembling tenure. Only the prestigious research university

combines systems in which individuals have maximum freedom to shape their work *and* freedom from the ultimate consequence of bad decisions: unemployment.

Tenure works only when academics subordinate their self-interest to something else: the callings of their profession, the collective purposes of the university, the detailed work of actual self-governance. They never actually acted that way, to be sure, but when universities were smaller and more purposeful they at least kept such ideals in mind. Now that self-interest has become paramount, tenure becomes not a protection of academic freedom but an economic arrangement designed to limit competition—of both people and ideas.

Operating in a feudal organizational system, academics are quick to adopt a feudal code of conduct. Charles Anderson describes it succinctly: "If each leaves the other alone, then we can all do as we please." Every college, every department, every *individual*, is a fiefdom. This is not, despite what some critics say, a "laissez faire" system. In that kind of system, individuals (or organizations) are concerned with what others do, obsessively so; they know that if a competitor offers a better, cheaper product than they do, they may go under. The operating rules of the university resemble a Mafia "honor" code more than a regime of laissez-faire: it's best not to inquire too deeply into anyone else's activities. If I ask the purpose of what you are doing, you will ask the same of me, and before long the rationale for the entire enterprise will begin to crumble.

III.

Once we appreciate that the culture of the university is more feudal than capitalist, two features that draw the ire of critics—specialization and tenure—appear in a new light.

Specialization is the bête noire of the university's conservative critics. This was as true in the 1950s and '60s, when Jacques Barzun and William Arrowsmith led the charge, as it is now, when Charles Sykes ridicules obscure article titles ("Evolution of the Potholder: From Technology to Popular Art") in scholarly journals.

It is not only conservatives who are exasperated by academic specialization. David Damrosch hearkens back to the idea of general education, "that last bastion of generalism, of which a healthy core curriculum should be the centerpiece." During the 1920s and '30s, the University of Chicago and Columbia University were swept by a "great books" movement that aimed to offer undergraduate students a common introduction to the world's great ideas. It was not only students whose lives were changed by such courses. At Columbia, literary critic Lionel Trilling began writing about Freud and Marx (and all manner of other things beyond the normal purview of an English professor) because he taught them to undergraduates. "The triumph of specialization during the past several decades," Damrosch writes, "has almost entirely eliminated such figures from the university."

Now, he concludes, general education, much praised in theory, is avoided in practice. Today's professors tend to see themselves more as members of their specialized discipline than of their university or even their department. The professional life of a professor of political science specializing in Indian politics, for example, has very little to do with anything that occurs on his or her campus. Such a professor writes for journals read by fellow specialists at other institutions, attends important conferences and professional meetings far from home, and seeks recognition from a community of scholars whose community is an intellectual rather than a geographical reality. Although paid by their universities, such specialists are essentially self-employed. Asked to choose between a time-consuming local service and a disciplinary obligation, they invariably choose the latter.

The triumph of specialization, the critics agree, works to the neglect of teaching. It represents the victory of graduate culture over undergraduate culture. Students (and their families) dig themselves into a dry well of tuition debt only to find themselves instructed by overworked graduate students while globe-trotting professors travel to professional conferences. And untenured assistant professors are poorly prepared for teaching. It would be an exaggeration to say that good teaching is punished in the uni-

The Making of the Megaversity

Before the 20th century, higher education was dominated by conservative colleges founded on religious principles and devoted chiefly to undergraduate instruction. In The Academic Revolution *(1968), Harvard sociologists Christopher Jencks and David Riesman described its transformation.*

The rise of the university has been gradual rather than sudden. The first Ph.D. was awarded in 1861 by Yale. Cornell opened in 1868 with Andrew White as president. Charles Eliot was inaugurated as president of Harvard in 1869. Yet it was not until the 1880s that anything like a modern university really took shape in America. Perhaps the most important breakthroughs were the founding of Johns Hopkins and Clark as primarily graduate universities. Eliot's success in instituting the elective system at Harvard was also important, both in its own right and because it facilitated the assemblage of a more scholarly and specialized faculty.

The 1890s saw further progress, with the founding of Chicago, the reform of Columbia, and the tentative acceptance of graduate work as an important activity in the leading state universities. This was also the period when national learned societies and journals were founded and when knowledge was broken up into its present departmental categories ("physics," "biology," "history," "philosophy,' and so forth), with the department emerging as the basic unit of academic administration. Medicine and law also became serious subjects of graduate study at this time, with Johns Hopkins leading the way in medicine and Harvard in law.

By World War I, two dozen major universities had emerged, and while the number has grown slightly since then, the changes have been slow. These universities have long been remarkably similar in what they encourage and value. They turn out Ph.D.s who, despite conspicuous exceptions, mostly have quite similar ideas about what their discipline covers, how it should be taught, and how its frontiers should be advanced. (This does not mean that there are no differences of opinion on these matters within the academic profession. It means only that when contrasted with trustees, administrators, parents, students, or the present authors, the outlook of Ph.D.s in a given discipline seems quite uniform.)

These men were not only likeminded at the outset, but they have established machinery for remaining like-minded. National and regional meetings for each academic discipline and subdiscipline are now annual affairs, national journals publish work in every specialized subject, and an informal national system of job placement and replacement has come into existence. The result is that large numbers of Ph.D.s now regard themselves almost as independent professionals like doctors or lawyers, responsible primarily to themselves and their colleagues rather than their employers, and committed to the advancement of knowledge rather than of any particular institution. . . .

These attitudes were greatly strengthened by World War II and its aftermath. Not only in the Manhattan Project but in other less glamorous ones, academic scientists helped contribute to the war effort, and for this and other reasons a dramatic increase in federal support for academic research ensued. . . . Unlike previous support for universities, these federal grants and contracts are for all practical purposes given to individual scholars or groups of scholars rather than to the institution where they happen to work. More often than not, if a man moves to a new institution his federal grants are transferred too. . . . The result has been further to enhance the status of the academician, who is now a prime fund raiser for his institution.

Since the amount of research support has grown much faster than the number of competent researchers, talented men have been in very short supply and command rapidly rising salaries. They are also increasingly free to set their own working conditions. The result has been a rapid decline in teaching loads for productive scholars, an increase in the ratio of graduate to undergraduate students at the institutions where scholars are concentrated, the gradual elimination of unscholarly undergraduates from these institutions, and the parallel elimination of unscholarly faculty.

versity, but it would not be going too far to say that when instructors devote a great deal of time and attention to preparing for classes their colleagues wonder if they aren't fleeing the demands of scholarship.

The critics also charge that specialization, by forcing institutions to offer competitive salaries and other inducements to attract specialists, drives up costs.

The imperatives of specialization flow from the priority given to research. As David W. Breneman, dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, writes in *Liberal Arts Colleges*, these forces are powerfully felt even at the nation's better liberal arts colleges, which, although they number only about 200 and account for only 260,000 enrollments (two percent of the total) have always defined a certain ideal of higher education.

At top colleges such as Williams and Amherst, teaching is still emphasized, but faculty publication at levels approximating those of the research university is expected. (To their credit, such institutions often try to reward types of publication more compatible with their teaching mission: books rather than specialized articles, literary works, even efforts that achieve what, in the eyes of university specialists, is the cardinal sin: popularity.) Such standards are required to attract the best scholarly talent. The top colleges also have to assume, moreover, that they will lose some of their outstanding junior faculty to the elite universities.

The effects of this arrangement trickle down to other institutions. Colleges just below the top 25, such as Skidmore or Franklin & Marshall, feel compelled to stay in the competition to recruit the best graduate students to their faculties. That means they have to pay for labs, leaves of absence, libraries, and other trappings of a research institution. Costs rise. (Tuition at the colleges is already in the neighborhood of $15,000 to $20,000.) And as Breneman notes, the likely shrinkage of the Ph.D. pool in the years ahead does not augur well for a slowdown.

Conservative critics of the university have also linked specialization to what they regard as the politicization of the academy. It is relatively easy, they point out, to translate left-wing political complaints into an academic specialty. Feminist theory, gay and lesbian studies, and what is actually called subaltern studies (a form of postcolonial studies, which involves the examination of literature and everyday life in former European colonies) are now departments and programs at many universities, not just bodies of ideas. And once such programs are established, the conventions of academic life demand that no one scrutinize them too carefully.

Overall, the case against academic specialization is strong, but I for one do not fully buy into it. Yes, there are people who write meaningless, jargon-filled articles for no other purpose than to advance their careers. But the quality of work being done overall in the American university is far higher now than it was in, say, the 1950s. There may be fewer historians writing for a general audience, but there are many better works of history. Academic philosophy can generate technical treatises devoid of common sense, but it can also produce John Rawls's magisterial *Theory of Justice* (1971). My own field, sociology, no longer has a C. Wright Mills, but, to take just the subject of race, it has Christopher Jencks, William Julius Wilson, Elijah Anderson, Orlando Patterson, and Douglas Massey—not bad scholarship by anyone's standards.

An academic world with less specialization would be worse than anything that exists today. Some inkling of what it might look like is provided by Ernest Boyer in *Scholarship Reconsidered*. Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, argues for a broader conception of scholarship, embracing such things as "the scholarship of application" (applied work) and "the scholarship of teaching" (knowledge of pedagogy and communication of results) as well as the "scholarship of discovery" (specialized research).

Yet teaching is teaching and scholarship is scholarship; calling one the other sounds like one of those therapeutically inspired ways of enhancing the self-esteem of those who find themselves somewhere else than at the top. Let colleges and universities reward teaching if they want, but let them call it teaching.

One crucial aspect of "the scholarship of discovery" distinguishes it from all the ersatz forms of scholarship advocated by Boyer: it is harder to do. That does not necessarily make it good, but it does make it different. Specialized research plays a crucial role in decision making about tenure and promotion for the same reason that SAT scores play a role in college admissions; it stands there, an unambiguous reality, clearly differentiating some from others. A record of books and articles deemed worthy of publication by one's peers may not be a perfect indicator of merit, but it is a tangible accomplishment. As long as some universities seek to distinguish the more accomplished from the rest, an emphasis on scholarly publication will be inevitable.

If the case against specialization itself is weak, the case against some of the forces driving it is very strong. What really stirs critics is not so much the pursuit of esoteric research in itself as the assumption of those who engage in it that they should be allowed to do whatever they want, whenever they want.

Alas, that argument is frequently heard, and nowhere more aggressively than among the postmodernists who have made such a comfortable home in the premodern university. Russell Jacoby's *Dogmatic Wisdom*, for example, contains a catalogue of self-incriminating statements by leftist academics. Historian Joan W. Scott, of the Institute for Advanced Study, and English professor Judith Frank, of Amherst College, declare that their immersion in theory gives them access to knowledge that is simply beyond the comprehension of what Scott calls "marginal intellectuals," let alone ordinary people.

A less impolitic expression of the same point of view comes from the six eminent authors of *Speaking for the Humanities*—a response to critics such as Lynne Cheney, former head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies. Unlike David Damrosch, these writers do not mourn the disappearance of broad-ranging academic intellectuals such as Lionel Trilling. To the contrary, they take the view that "belle lettrists" and advocates of the "gentlemanly ideal" have no standing to contest the "competence of the best scholars in the humanities today," which is "remarkable." Humanistic thought "must be free to pursue questions as far as possible without knowing what general use or relevance the answers might prove to have," they write, as they "assert the value not just of specialization but of professionalization also."

The addition of that word "professionalization" is significant. In *Professing Literature*, his history of the English department, Gerald Graff argues that professionals are not those who have the best ideas but those who win temporary control over the way English is taught. We have our own institutions now, the defenders of professionalism seem to be saying, and we don't want you, the non-professionals, to interfere with them.

Five of the six authors of *Speaking for the Humanities* were directors of academic centers for the humanities when they wrote their report. Not surprisingly, they conclude that the existence of such centers "answers most directly to negative criticisms and most fully expresses the range and importance of the humanities." Like the academic Left, they confuse the genuine need for specialization with the spurious effort to protect the institutions and practices of faculty privilege.

Academics are deluding themselves if they think that they can have autonomy without accountability. The privileged always live at the sufferance of others. Faculty status is a privilege; the salaries may not be great (although they are not bad), but tenure alone can, in an uncertain economy, be priceless. And the sheer joy of being able to explore ideas is a privilege as rarely given as it is exercised. To suggest that no one has the right to poke into the business of such a privileged group is a remarkably insensitive slap in the face—and a stupid one at that. Consumers have a right to be furious.

And they are making themselves heard. Even as debate continues, it is clear that the high point of specialization is already in the past. (And it is important to note that only a minority of academics, mostly at the prestige institutions, undertake specialized research.)

Especially at the universities most dependent on tuition revenues, pressures for a renewed emphasis on teaching are building. Administrators have begun to sponsor centers for teaching excellence. Core curricula are making a comeback. The State University of New York at Stony Brook has taken out ads in the *New York Times* trumpeting its renewed focus on teaching. There is even talk, and even at research-oriented universities, of the need for departments to hire "public intellectuals," academics who speak to a broader audience.

In areas where they have some leeway—for example, in filling endowed chairs standing outside departments—university presidents now tend to search for generalists, not specialists, academics whose name recognition among the general public will draw students.

It would be a shame if consumer anger, properly addressed at the faculty's demand for complete autonomy, were to spill over into a campaign against academic specialization. Taxpayers and consumers might, if talked to seriously, come to understand why specialized research is important. But they will never be persuaded of what is patently untrue—that the university should be organized on the principle that faculty have some special status that renders them immune from public scrutiny and criticism.

IV.

If consumers are angry about specialization, academic administrators worry about tenure. Their concern has a very practical edge. In 1993 Congress refused to renew higher education's exemption from the abolition of mandatory retirement rules, raising the prospect of a faculty full of tenured and aging professors, with little or no turnover. Tenure has been abolished at some institutions and is under attack by state legislators. If the opinion pages of the academics' trade publication, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, are any guide, even some tenured faculty have concluded that the whole system has become little more than an excuse for irresponsibly self-interested behavior.

Frontispiece to the "Humours of Oxford" *(1730) by G. Vandergucht, after engraving by William Hogarth*

The reform of tenure will take much longer, and will be far more difficult, than the reform of specialization. The move back toward general education and an emphasis on teaching is made possible by the fact that consumers have as much power in this realm as faculty. But tenure is kept in place, at least in the elite universities, by the fact that no self-respecting academic "star" would accept a position without it. An institution seeking to remain in

the first rank will have no choice but to offer it. What can and must be changed is the way in which tenure is awarded.

When academics choose who will join them for life, they have to ask questions about what others are doing that faculty culture normally forbids. People who rarely can be bothered to comment on what others teach or know are suddenly called on to determine whether another person will enjoy absolute job security until she dies. A jump of this magnitude is bound to leave everyone a little dizzy. Academics could respond with thoughtful self-reflection, strict adherence to their own standards, and responsibility to their institution and their vocation. Unfortunately, they don't.

Occasionally, when a candidate who has been rejected claims that he has been the victim of politics, sexism, or some other form of bias, a tenure fight spills into public view. But the larger scandal is that rejection is exceedingly rare.

Tenure decisions today are shaped by one overriding paradox. Scarce goods usually command higher prices, but as tenured slots have become more valuable, faculty members have become more willing to give them away. During the 1950s and '60s, when tenured posts were plentiful, academics were more likely to say no to candidates. Today they are more likely to say yes. At the University of Massachusetts, 96 percent of those recommended for tenure between 1990 and '93 received it, a fact brought to light when the trustees caused an uproar last summer by actually saying no to three candidates. (Saying no, in the culture of academe, does not necessarily mean losing one's job; they can come up again.) UMass is not typical. At the main campus at Amherst, 86 percent of the faculty are tenured, compared to a nationwide average of 65 percent. Still, the proportion of academics with tenure is creeping up.

Why don't the elementary laws of supply and demand apply? Part of the reason is that many of those making tenure decisions are products of the 1960s who hold values that make it almost impossible to say no. To claim that one person merits tenure while another does not suggests that there are standards, a position many academics deny in their writings. The 1960s also taught that individuals count more than institutions. Nobody wants to ask if granting tenure to a person will serve the institution's interest. It's easier to ask simply, "Has the candidate done enough to warrant it?"

Most important of all, however, academics generally do not like the market, and tenure allows them to avoid a market in faculty talent. The seven-year apprenticeship rule brings individuals along under a paternalistic system. They are subject to frequent loyalty tests, ritual baptisms, and other rites of the academic way of life. At the end of the apprenticeship at least this much can be said about the candidate: we know her. Having spent seven years with another person does not guarantee that she will be an acceptable colleague for life, but compared to selecting someone we do not know at all, the gamble may be worth taking.

Faculty are more comfortable cultivating someone from within because the relationships thus produced are more feudalistic than capitalistic. This is not a system in which institutions bid for the best talent. Having participated in tenure decisions at three institutions over the course of more than three decades, I have heard the word *fit* much more often than the word *merit*.

True, outside opinions are sought. As few as 10 and as many as 20 scholars in the candidate's field will be asked for their views on his academic qualifications. But since academics tend to favor tenure abroad as well as at home, in most of their letters they bend over backward to find words of praise for the candidate. Surely he would be tenured at my own institution, says the expert from an Ivy League university. His reputation is worldwide, his book a work of great significance. He would easily be ranked among the very top people in his field, without question. No one believes such hyperbole, but no one is expected to. The general rule is: say something positive or say nothing at all.

There is one interesting exception to the tenure-for-all tendency: it is far more common to say no to senior "stars" being recruited (often under pressure from administrators) from other universities than to candidates from within. Outside recruitment comes about as close to a market in talent as the academic world can—which is no doubt why faculty are so suspicious of it. The rules governing academic success are the obverse of capitalist values: the more one has published, the more vulnerable one is to attack; the better one is connected, the greater the likelihood that one has enemies; the more one has succeeded in attracting grant money, the greater the anxieties of the grantless. Some departments deal with the market issue by simply refusing to hire any senior people.

One can detect inside academia the beginnings of an effort to reform, if not eliminate, tenure. A study by the American Association of Higher Education exploring the post-tenure review of faculty members and the highly (and negatively) publicized efforts by the board of Bennington College in 1994 to replace faculty who had "presumptive" tenure (long service but no formal job security) are just two examples. Tenure is, in fact, quite vulnerable. Whatever its attractions (especially to those who have it), no one should have as much power as those who hand out job security for life—and no one should have as little power as those who seek it. It is difficult to imagine that tenure as we know it can continue: at the very least, tenured faculty will find themselves having to justify to everyone else why they should have job security when no one else does.

Does all this mean that tenure should be abolished? Not necessarily. What is untenable is a system in which faculty want the power to determine who joins them but not the responsibility of passing judgment. Change that aspect of faculty culture, and tenure will likely remain. Keep the current culture, however, and tenure will (and should) be doomed.

V.

All institutions have cultures. Just a few years ago, it was common to speak of corporate cultures—the ways in which, say, the paternalism of IBM differed from the youthful entrepreneurialism of Apple. Anthropologists tell us that cultures come in strong and weak forms. Some societies are so deeply stamped by a particular culture that when a colonial power arrives, its culture is changed more than that of the occupied. Other cultures are so weak that the moment they come into contact with foreign ideas, they disappear.

Although corporations have more power in America than universities, the culture of the university is stronger than corporate cultures. Once the market turned against it, the paternalistic ethos of IBM did not last long. Faculty culture is, for better and for worse, far more durable. Regardless of field, irrespective of geography, independent of academic status—the mere fact of being a faculty member predisposes an individual to think and act in particular ways. Faculty culture trumps every other kind of culture: no matter what the original country, gender, or ethnicity of an academic, once someone becomes a member of a faculty, that person is irrevocably stamped as a member of his profession.

This culture's imperviousness to change owes much to faculty's suspicion of the market, which is the major agent of change in modern society, and to their ability to resist it through the maintenance of a feudal order. Yet feudalism did finally go under. So, one feels confident to predict, will the feudal culture of the postmodern university. The question facing the American university is not whether it will change, but how—whether professors will reform themselves or be reformed by forces beyond their control.