

## Are We the Last Professors?

What does the future hold for higher education in America? As we endure yet another severe budget crisis here in California, all the energy seems to be on the side of our critics. With revenues dwindling and calls for accountability on the rise, more of the same old business model “innovations” are being offered up to us as if they are the cutting edge of pedagogical thinking. As Frank Donoghue notes, “the business model for higher education devised by the for-profits has tremendous appeal to administrators and lawmakers in an era of steadily declining public funding and tuition raises that are quickly becoming prohibitive. Many underfunded traditional public and private institutions are dealing with their financial problems by adopting the business methods and aspects of the for-profit’s mission . . . The embrace of the business model by those colleges and universities will significantly change the way that professors are treated; indeed, it could reshape their professional identities. As university presidents behave more and more like CEOs (already a cliché), provosts and deans become the primary managers and supervisors, and professors become the managed service workers, interacting on the front line with students/customers (also already a cliché). University chief financial officers will become more powerful, conducting rigorous audits and influencing polices to control overhead and cut costs, just as they do in corporations.”

Donoghue calls this “the hostile takeover of the professor’s job” and points out some of the language coming out of the for-profits is a harbinger of things to come as professors there are referred to as “practitioner-faculty” or “information delivery personnel.” His eye-opening book, *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities*, shows that this development is nothing new. Contrary to those who speak of the state of higher education as “in crisis,” Donoghue argues that, “Since the beginning of the Reagan era . . . corporate America has largely viewed higher education as a consternating labor problem. The dismantling of the American professorate is part and parcel of the casualization of labor in general, a phenomenon that began in earnest in the 1980s and has accelerated since.”

Ironically, the Cold War offered higher education a bit of a respite, Donoghue observes, as the United States found it useful to hold up support for arts and sciences disciplines as evidence of our superiority to the soulless Soviet Union. Before that period, however, the hostility amongst the corporate world toward higher education was unabashed with “Unregulated monopolistic capitalists such as Carnegie and Crane” seeing much of higher education as “literally worthless.” More specifically, Donoghue notes that, “America’s early twentieth century capitalists were motivated by an ethically based anti-intellectualism that transcended interest in the financial bottom line. Their distrust of the ideal of intellectual inquiry for its own sake led them to insist that if universities were to be preserved at all, they must operate on a different set of principles from those governing the liberal arts.” For this principle they looked to Fredrick Winslow Taylor, whose ideas in *Principles of Scientific Management* became the core of the corporate world’s gospel of efficiency and launched a nationwide campaign to systematize labor at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Taylor’s entry into American higher education came in 1909 when MIT president, Henry S. Pritchett wrote to him and asked how he could do an “economic study” of education. In

response, Taylor personally recommended Morris Llewellyn Cooke, whose *Academic and Industrial Inefficiency* provided the blue print for academic Taylorism. As Donoghue notes, “Cooke’s recommendations are very farsighted. They accurately anticipate the business model for today’s for profit universities . . . Not surprisingly, Cooke calls for the abolition of tenure, since tenure, the ultimate worker autonomy, has no place in Taylor’s system. Two of his other findings are far more subtle: Cooke recommends that to maximize efficiency and organizational control, (1) textbooks and lecture notes for all of a university’s ‘elementary and medium branches’ of instruction should be standardized and (2), that those materials plus every professor’s lectures and ‘pedagogical mechanisms’ should be the property of the university. Cooke’s recommended policies would eventually form the lines of battle between faculty who wish to preserve their professional individuality and university administrators eager to control the growing costs of multifaceted institutions of higher learning.” Donoghue observes that the power of this kind of academic Taylorism comes from Americans’ readiness to accept “an ethic of productivity for its own sake as the irrefutable measure of success *of any kind*.” For Corporate America, this has been a useful tool in their efforts to externalize the cost of worker training to the state, which it can then chastise regularly for failing to produce workers ready to compete in the marketplace. Hence the battle has been going on for a century.

Today, Donoghue suggests, those who favor a view of education not totally dominated by a purely instrumental business model are losing, badly. In chapters on the casualization of academic labor, the decline of publishing, the overproduction of graduate students, the assault on tenure, and the corporatization of academia, he makes a starkly convincing case that professors and other academic workers are being deskilled, outsourced, and systematically devalued. In his estimation, “the corporate reorientation” of American higher education is nearly complete and in the very near future “it will be the rule, not the exception, to think of a university as a company rather than a social institution.” The liberal arts model of education will not die, but live on only in a hundred or so prestigious institutions devoted to “educating the children of the elite and privileged for positions of leadership in law, science, medicine, the corporate sector, and, of course, their own exclusive branch of higher education.” For the rest of us? “The two year college, often run for profit, will become the new standard post-secondary education vehicle” without the need for anything other than “credentials directly related to [the customer’s] future occupation.” Thus, “The gulf between these elite universities and the institutions that educate everyone else will widen in ways that will complicate our efforts to define both the idea of higher education and the concept of access to higher education.”

For those of us who got jobs in community colleges because we believed that it was a noble calling to bring the assets of “elite” education to the most democratic, diverse, working class institutions in America, Donoghue’s book is not pleasant reading. But, even if you don’t agree that our situation is as dire as he does, the trends he outlines as surely with us. His modest solution is for faculty to 1) thoroughly understand how institutions of higher education works and 2) challenge the economically myopic and sometimes factually inaccurate assertions of the business model. Put succinctly, we have to be able to name the system and call out snake oil salesmen when we see them. Thus, we can no longer be naïve about the ideological nature of reform and what is driving it. We also need to stop lying to students that the *only* benefit of education is the guarantee of improved economic standing when, as Holly Sklar notes, “wages have fallen despite greatly increased education. Since 1973, the share of workers without a high

school degree has plummeted and the percentage with at least four years of college has more than doubled. But the 2008 average hourly wage was 10 percent below 1973, adjusted for inflation . . . [In addition to this], college tuition and fees increased three times more than median family income from 1982 to 2007. Student borrowing has more than doubled in just the last decade. Students from lower-income families receive smaller grants from colleges and universities than students from upper-income families.” Clearly a college education is still a very valuable asset, but it’s not the goose that laid the golden egg. So, unless being educated has some other pressing personal and/or social value, we may as well fold our tent.

To this, I would add that the more idealistic notion that we need to hold true to some of the old, traditional definitions of liberal education and assert that it is not “serving students” to treat them like customers at Walmart. It is not elitist to hold to pedagogical standards, but it *is* cynically elitist to evoke democracy and devotion to students while gutting the core mission of our colleges in the service of a vast and vulgar instrumentalism that knows the cost of everything and the value of nothing. Perhaps even community college students should know that there’s more to life than measured outcomes.

--by Jim Miller