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The Last Professor

In previous columns and in a recent book I have argued that higher education, properly understood, is distinguished by the absence of a direct and designed relationship between its activities and measurable effects in the world.

This is a very old idea that has received periodic re-formulations. Here is a statement by the philosopher Michael Oakeshott that may stand as a representative example: “There is an important difference between learning which is concerned with the degree of understanding necessary to practice a skill, and learning which is expressly focused upon an enterprise of understanding and explaining.”

Understanding and explaining what? The answer is understanding and explaining anything as long as the exercise is not performed with the purpose of intervening in the social and political crises of the moment, as long, that is, as the activity is not regarded as instrumental – valued for its contribution to something more important than itself.

This view of higher education as an enterprise characterized by a determined inutility has often been challenged, and the debates between its proponents and those who argue for a more engaged university experience are lively and apparently perennial. The question such debates avoid is whether the Oakeshottian ideal (celebrated before him by Aristotle, Kant and Max Weber, among others) can really flourish in today’s educational landscape. It may be fun to argue its merits (as I have done), but that argument may be merely academic – in the pejorative sense of the word – if it has no support in the real world from which it rhetorically distances itself. In today’s climate, does it have a chance?

In a new book, “[The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities](#),” Frank Donoghue (as it happens, a former student of mine) asks that question and answers “No.”

Donoghue begins by challenging the oft-repeated declaration that liberal arts education in general and the humanities in particular face a crisis, a word that suggests an interruption of a normal state of affairs and the

possibility of restoring the natural order of things.

“Such a vision of restored stability,” says Donoghue, “is a delusion” because the conditions to which many seek a return – healthy humanities departments populated by tenure-track professors who discuss books with adoring students in a cloistered setting – have largely vanished. Except in a few private wealthy universities (functioning almost as museums), the splendid and supported irrelevance of humanist inquiry for its own sake is already a thing of the past. In “two or three generations,” Donoghue predicts, “humanists . . . will become an insignificant percentage of the country’s university instructional workforce.”

How has this happened? According to Donoghue, it’s been happening for a long time, at least since 1891, when Andrew Carnegie congratulated the graduates of the Pierce College of Business for being “fully occupied in obtaining a knowledge of shorthand and typewriting” rather than wasting time “upon dead languages.”

Industrialist Richard Teller Crane was even more pointed in his 1911 dismissal of what humanists call the “life of the mind.” No one who has “a taste for literature has the right to be happy” because “the only men entitled to happiness . . . are those who are useful.”

The opposition between this view and the view held by the heirs of Matthew Arnold’s conviction that poetry will save us could not be more stark. But Donoghue counsels us not to think that the two visions are locked in a struggle whose outcome is uncertain. One vision, rooted in an “ethic of productivity” and efficiency, has, he tells us, already won the day; and the proof is that in the very colleges and universities where the life of the mind is routinely celebrated, the material conditions of the workplace are configured by the business model that scorns it.

The best evidence for this is the shrinking number of tenured and tenure-track faculty and the corresponding rise of adjuncts, part-timers more akin to itinerant workers than to embedded professionals.

Humanities professors like to think that this is a temporary imbalance and talk about ways of redressing it, but Donoghue insists that this development, planned by no one but now well under way, cannot be reversed. Universities under increasing financial pressure, he explains, do not “hire the most experienced teachers, but rather the cheapest teachers.” Tenured and tenure-track teachers now make up only 35 percent of the pedagogical workforce and “this number is steadily falling.”

Once adjuncts are hired to deal with an expanding student body (and the student body is always expanding), budgetary planners find it difficult to dispense with the savings they have come to rely on; and “as a result, an adjunct workforce, however imperceptible its origins . . . has now mushroomed into a significant fact of academic life.”

What is happening in traditional universities where the ethos of the liberal arts is still given lip service is the forthright policy of for-profit universities, which make no pretense of valuing what used to be called the “higher learning.” John Spering, founder of the group that gave us Phoenix University, is refreshingly blunt: “Coming here is not a rite of passage. We are not trying to develop value systems or go in for that ‘expand their minds’” nonsense.

The for-profit university is the logical end of a shift from a model of education centered in an individual professor who delivers insight and inspiration to a model that begins and ends with the imperative to deliver the information and skills necessary to gain employment.

In this latter model, the mode of delivery – a disc, a computer screen, a video hook-up – doesn’t matter so long as delivery occurs. Insofar as there are real-life faculty in the picture, their credentials and publications (if they have any) are beside the point, for they are just “delivery people.”

Spering understands the difficulty of achieving accreditation for his institution as a proxy “for cultural battles between defenders of 800 years of educational (and largely religious) traditions, and innovation that was based on the ideas of the marketplace – transparency, efficiency, productivity and accountability.”

Those ideas have now triumphed (Carnegie and Crane are victorious), and this means, Donoghue concludes, “that all fields deemed impractical, such as philosophy, art history, and literature, will henceforth face a constant danger of being deemed unnecessary.” And as a corollary “professors will come to be seen by everyone (not just those outside the academy) as unaffordable anomalies.”

In his preface, Donoghue tells us that he will “offer nothing in the way of uplifting solutions to the problems [he] describes.” In the end, however, he can’t resist recommending something and he advises humanists to acquire “a thorough familiarity with how the university works,” for “only by studying the institutional histories of scholarly research, of tenure, of academic status, and . . . of the ever-changing college curriculum, can we prepare ourselves for the future.”

But – and this is to his credit – he doesn't hold out the slightest hope that this future we may come to understand will have a place in it for us.

People sometimes believe that they were born too late or too early. After reading Donoghue's book, I feel that I have timed it just right, for it seems that I have had a career that would not have been available to me had I entered the world 50 years later. Just lucky, I guess.

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