

Robert B. Tapp, "The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities", *On the Horizon*, Vol. 18 Iss: 2, pp.147 - 153

Viewed from the most general perspective, higher education in the American colonies had proceeded along British-Continental lines. As the new nation expanded westward, land-grant public universities developed in the new states, often with a second institution focusing on the needs of local agriculture. Many of the new religious groups felt it necessary to create sectarian colleges that could protect their children from less-desirable religiosities in the older existing colleges. After Independence, many of the Enlightenment themes and values that had functioned so effectively in the political arena began to influence genres such as history and philosophy. Even divinity was affected. As Harvard, for instance, moved beyond its Puritan past more in a liberal Unitarian direction, the somewhat less-liberal Universalists created Tufts to afford their young men a more congenial climate. And the mainline Congregational churches now drew their ministers from Yale.

As industrialism developed in the nineteenth century, some of the older universities began to add research facilities along the lines of German universities. Medicinal education and training developed a more scientific base. Flux was everywhere. The Civil War also accelerated this differentiation of the university scene.

England's Matthew Arnold surveyed this new world of knowledge in his 1867 poem *Dover Beach*:

***... for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.***

Arnold's solution, in *Culture and Anarchy*, 1869, was to mobilize a defense of culture, helping people learn and cherish "the best that has been thought and said". That became the mission of the elite schools there and in America. (I can remember being privileged to join the headmaster of one of those Devon schools almost a century later at a rugby match. We kept being interrupted by construction noises across the campus. His apology was that he had been forced to add a science building. Sensing my American naïveté, he added, "We call it "The Stinks", you know").

Disciplines strengthened and emerged in the liberal arts. Classics, philosophy, of course. But now add history, and economics, sociology, political science, anthropology, psychology, comparative religion. And literature plus art and music studies. Many of these developing disciplines were clustered together as "humanities", and they furnished a significant part of what the college degree implied as a liberal education. Many years ago, Arthur E. Morgan – scientist, first TVA head, Antioch president – insisted that yesterday's sciences remained as today's humanities. That insight stayed with me and I began to restate Matthew Arnold's dictum as "remembering the best that has been thought and said and made". "Making" includes not just the sciences but the arts and

architectures that also distinguish human evolution on this planet.

Coming at university education from that perspective requires enormous choices. Curriculum builders must decide times and places of human activities to be included. Which cultures deserve more attention, and why? Which learning units should be featured, which required? If higher education is already limited to a privileged half of its cohort, what of this knowledge core needs somehow to be available to that other half? And how? Most complicated of all, since human thinking, saying, building is ongoing and partially cumulative, how can this process persist, K-to-Gray?

In the present situation, such thinking is hopelessly utopian. Universities directly serve only a small part of the population, part of the time. Yet those who implement learning at the K-12 levels, contacting almost the whole population, are products of those universities. Cutbacks from the recession along with narrowed focus and increased subject matters for the varieties of vocationalism would seem to pre-empt retaining any of this liberal arts tradition. Or has this already happened?

Readers of *On the Horizon* have been well briefed on distinctions between science and technology, as well as on the speed with which these two components of modernity drive social and educational change. Some contributing authors here speak of “wisdom” as a desirable but by no means inevitable complement to knowledge. Can we, or should we, expect wisdom to accompany university education?

The European pattern, adopted by Puritan universities, saw wisdom coming from religion and its philosophy supports. By the time of Independence, Enlightenment perspectives viewed religions less positively. Jefferson's new university, for instance, moved wisdom away from the churches and located it within educated people. The emerging industrialism's fortunes were linked to the outcome of the Civil War, along with the science and research that followed.

We can get a good idea of the complexity of these shifts, and the slowness of their gaining acceptance, by looking at “belief” in evolution in present America. This core of modern biology may well have developed outside the British university system, but it was in the universities and their embrace of science that this central re-thinking of the natural world has flowered. Nonetheless, 40 percent of the public today believe the world to be less than 10,000 years old and reject the idea that humans have evolved from simpler life forms. Even if we re-phrase this, claiming that a majority do accept that evolution occurred a long time period, a majority of that majority still believe the process was guided by some kind of supernatural intelligence.

That small minority of us who realized that survival depends on continuing adaptation to changing circumstances expanded with university education, and with a move away from conservative religions and into modernity. Progress was possible once reasoning began to question and improve received wisdoms. Cultures that cultivated learning were best equipped to survive, and this meant removing then traditional barriers to learning –

gender, race, class.

Until the present recession, Americans have been expanding their systems of higher education. But transformation of their colleges and universities has also been taking place.

Frank Donoghue's new book, *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and The Fate of the Humanities* (Fordham University Press, New York, 2008, ISBN 978-0-8232-2859-1), is a brilliant, readable, brief, and tough assessment of those changes and their dire implications. One hopes (but doubts) that his work will find a wide audience. Those of us who have spent our lives in and near universities, however, will second many of his assertions.

His preface sets a tone that suggests his lament is more of an epitaph than an alarm-call: "I think that professors of the humanities have already lost the power to rescue themselves." Central to his thesis is the interaction between the developing industrialism and education. "Over the course the last century, the American university has risen to prominence both alongside and in opposition to corporate logic and corporate values" (p. xi).

Despite this, his text describes the problematics of today's universities, does an excellent job conveying the analyses of other scholars, and sets a gloomy best-case scenario. Bringing all this together will surely shock humanities professors who are the main victims – and bring great comfort to administrators and corporations and competitors who are the aggressors and winners. By continuing insistence on historical perspective, we are reminded that the present situation is more problem than crisis. Chapter 1 lays this groundwork of corporate disdain and hostility to the humanities and pits Andrew Carnegie and Richard Teller Crane against Thorstein Veblen and Upton Sinclair. If the most important social goal is industrial productivity, surely Shakespeare is irrelevant; and inventing phrases like "conspicuous consumption" is clearly subversive. As Donoghue's mentor Stanley Fish has often observed, public intellectuals are unpredictable and unruly. And the kinds of scholarship nurtured by universities, as Deborah Rohde has written, "vanishes without apparent influence", 98 percent of articles in arts and humanities never being cited (p. 48).

Donoghue's choice of words may be somewhat exotic, but he sees this devaluation of the professoriate reviving in the Reagan era, when "corporate America has largely viewed higher education as a consternating labor problem. The dismantling of the American professoriate is part and parcel of the casualization of labor in general, a phenomenon that began in earnest in the 1980s and has accelerated since then" (p. xiv).

The powers of trade unions came under attack with Ronald Reagan's critique of the air-traffic controllers and subsequently accelerated. The somewhat-equivalent for professors was tenure. Once achieved, of course, further advancement and amenities still depended upon performance, but "academic freedom" was established.

The number and percentage of tenured and tenure-track faculty has continued to decline in recent years and is now at the all-time low of 35 percent (down from 55 percent in 1970)! This means that most students, most of the time, will be exposed to part-time and adjunct faculties. It also means that administrators have saved enormous amounts of money. Health insurance, retirement, sabbaticals, research time, office and secretarial expenses can be avoided.

One of the less obvious effects of a shrinking tenured professoriate is that academic decisions including curricular staffing and requirements shift more toward administrators. Another weakened policy is the fairly recent attempt to remove existing gender and race gaps in professoriate. For a variety of reasons, these gaps widen as faculty move up the advancement ladder. Katherine Sender, a dean at the University of Pennsylvania, notes this “leaky pipeline”. In 2007, 42 percent of the assistant professors were women but only 18 percent of the full professors. For faculty members “of color”, the percentages were 27 and 9 ([http://chronicle.com.floyd.lib.umn.edu/blogPost/Career-Pipeline-Not-Leaking/20506/](http://chronicle.com/floyd.lib.umn.edu/blogPost/Career-Pipeline-Not-Leaking/20506/)).

With this shrinking of secure positions, Donoghue's “competing in academia” naturally increases. Advancement depends upon research and publication – and that may take time away from improved teaching and certainly takes time away from participation in departmental and campus-wide governance.

What then?

Universities always eventually adapt to their societies. This means that they will bend to corporate expectations about what a university should teach and how it should operate; more directly, they will accommodate student demands about what would make a college education worth the time and money spent on it (p. 83).

Donoghue sees this as the foundation of the vocationalization of higher education. More post-secondary students, fewer professors and more instructors, shifting job markets (engineering, law, computer science, business – maybe teaching in the near future) will structure these adaptations. And none of these areas depends on a strong humanities or liberal arts component.

The college degree was a significant distinction when only a few male members of a generation displayed it. Coeducation potentially doubled that number, and social mobility affected it even more. Add land-grant colleges and public institutions with their lowered costs, and then a GI-Bill after the Second War and almost half of each age cohort was entering college.

The power of inherent distinction was thus weakened. In addition, many of the returning veterans felt the need to make up for lost years. Older students were also more likely to be starting families while in school, or at least marrying and thus feeling stronger economic pressures. A main result of all these factors was the focus on cash value of

courses and curricula. The traditional liberal education began a downfall that continues accelerating.

Considerations of what should be offered, recommended, required at college levels must take into account what students already bring with them. And the best way to describe the US situation is chaotic. With more than 14,000 school districts in 50 states, few generalizations would be valid. Without well-developed national testing as one measure among many, there is no good way to know what even public schools are accomplishing. Choices in larger states, such as Texas, determine for most what will be in textbooks, and how it will be presented. With controversial subjects such as evolution, moreover, there is no way of knowing that they have become part of curriculum or testing. When we move beyond the sciences, this becomes even more problematic. Polls reveal that a majority of respondents believe that the country was founded as a Christian nation, indicating poor teaching of eighteenth-century American Enlightenment. How US history is taught becomes very regional – Civil War v. War Between the States, local figures overshadowing national and world figures.

Vigorous debate continues over national testing of students in public schools. Charter schools, despite their tax-money funding, are even more likely to stress subgroup interests and be untestable. Determining actual results of learning in church-related schools is even more difficult, and “private” schools that range from elite boarding schools to racially segregated academies produce unknown results. Growing numbers of children are being home-schooled, which obviously limits their learning to knowledge-levels of parents.

Central to any of the future speculations is what Tom Abeles calls “synthetic worlds”, those places created by new technologies that traditional universities reluctantly embraced:

In a large part, they have been responsible for the rise of the for-profit, virtual, universities, radical changes in how academics publish and access information and, even how they see and purpose a university experience. The metaphor of the automobile provides a fitting image (Abeles, 2007).

Just as the shift within industrializing societies to those horseless carriages transformed local worlds, the educational scene has changed. In just a few years, for instance, the path-breaking proprietary Great Courses now have to compete with iTunesU and its push for many campuses to post free courses there that can be watched/heard/taken anywhere by anyone at any time. Google Books is quickly putting much of our worldwide library in pockets and purses. Downloading to a personal computer was an intermediate step for “digital immigrants”, a step already being bypassed by “digital natives”.

Consider how this now questions the traditional learning style of the university. Those experts on the stages, the resource pages in a library, laboratories with extensive equipment, physical isolation from the ordinary world, sociological isolation from

non-students, outside-of-class peer-interactive learning, little if any outside job-time, four-year completion with few dropouts, economic barriers of tuition and textbook – are all transformed in a virtual world. Only time and attention are still required, along with ever cheaper and improving technology.

These innovations relate to the changes taking place in attendance and costs. Since 1980, “average college tuition costs have risen three times faster than the consumer price index” (p. 89). In 1947 (remember that the GI Bill was in full swing) “college enrollments were equally divided between private and public colleges; in 2001, 81 percent of all undergraduates were enrolled in public institutions, including 44 percent at community colleges” (p. 90).

Both because of historic patterns and the current recession, these over-enrolled public institutions suffer at levels of faculty salaries as compared to private institutions. For those reasons, they too are “adopting the business methods and aspects of the for-profits' mission” (p. 105).

Analysis now moves beyond these common features to contrast the futures of underfunded public institutions and those of the 50 or so elite schools that will rely on maintaining their prestige for survival. In those schools, liberal arts have some chance of surviving. Within that small group are some flagship state universities, but we still are only dealing with 1 percent of the total schools. Donoghue's position is that “neither the traditional disciplines of literature, history, and philosophy nor their scholars can survive if the humanities are supported by only a handful of exclusive institutions” (p. 128f.).

The overall tone of this book is that the humanities will not survive. Corporate needs have won, vocationalism will call the tune. In the final pages, James Traub, former president of the for-profit University of Phoenix, puts it quite clearly: “the people who are our students don't want an education. They want what the education provides for them – better jobs, moving up in their careers” (p. 136).

The competitive pressures from China and India seem likely to strengthen this vocationalism in the great majority of our colleges. Advising humanities professors to spend more time studying the ways that tenure disappeared and learning how universities really work seems like very slim counsel for defending humanities.

To this reviewer, a much stronger case could be made for the importance of the humanities in maintaining and improving a democratic society. Fullness of life and the pursuit of happiness involve helping citizens develop shared moral values in the public arena. Clearly the clashes among religions past and present have shown us that “religion” alone is not a reliable source of meaning and ethics. Similarly, a reliance on the sciences strengthens certain values such as truth-telling and integrity, but leaves many questions undeveloped.

Nonetheless, humanists have much to learn from ways that their colleagues in the hard

sciences keep developing new disciplines and merging older ones. The consequences of beliefs and ideologies and worldviews are empirical matters, and tomorrow's philosophy will be in dialogue with sociology and neuroscience. Precedent? History in the nineteenth century realizing the importance of separating facts from myths.

Some will say the recent Culture Wars were suicidal for humanists. Younger scholars often dismissed prevailing ideas and interpretations as mere cultural constructions, only to be charged with simply building new constructions in arguing their point. The humanities department at one university self-destructed when the younger faculty refused to continue teaching Western history since it was "racist and imperialist" (www.humanismtoday.org/vol11/tapp.html). Donoghue spends little time assessing controversies such as this, saying that he sees "the Culture Wars as largely played out, and as a phenomenon that never posed a danger to the humanities that humanists could not ably and even eloquently fend off" (p. xv). Other disciplines and institutions were more successful in incorporating new disciplines such as "social history" and "women's studies". Similarly, I would argue that multiculturalism taken too absolutely can prevent empirical comparisons. All ideologies must be studied, but to contend, without evidence, that they are equal replaces reality with theory.

What happens when suppliers take potential customers seriously? Or when politicians court voters? We usually call it populism but it is also a form of democratism. Fareed Zakaria correctly reminds us that democracy is a downsizing of decision and power. In the case of education, the elite take more seriously the wants of their students. Clearly this is happening throughout US culture.

One of the clearest illustrations is with classical music. Formerly successful orchestras now struggle to survive, while pop music and rock bands dominate. Part of the reason, of course, is that more money can be made purveying such music and creating successions of new stars for customers to demand. University musicologists, on the other hand, have been involved in uncovering how almost-forgotten Bach's and Mozart's became noticed and cherished.

Another function of the humanities was the creation and valuing of high culture, an alternative to pop-culture. Pop- and mass-culture have now become much more lucrative markets, pushing aside high culture, with the result that students have more interesting in studying the pop culture that shaped their pre-college years than in transcending it. Public service requirements for radio and television once guaranteed widespread free access to classical music. That epoch ended. Public radio and TV now stumble financially, and many younger school and university teachers have thus been deprived during their own youth. Financial limitations, mixed with commercial alternatives, have altered public exposure. As other factors increase the roles of consumer tastes play in the college marketplace, the humanities lose further relevance.

For somewhat parallel reasons, the wide range of arts that humanity keeps producing are disappearing from school curricula and retreating to museums and galleries.

Commercial TV turns elsewhere, and governmental funding withers at both federal and local levels.

Spending time discovering “the best that has been thought and said and built” may not enhance most post-university careers, but it can certainly enhance the quality of life for which careers typically provide support. And knowing the varieties of human experimentation can help us do better in creating societies in which all people can flourish. Both psychology and literature help people better understand themselves. Art and architecture and geology all provide desirable visual delights. Learning to think clearly leaves fewer problems unsolved.

References:

Abeles, T. (2007), “Synthetic worlds and the University: approaching the unknown”, *On the Horizon*, Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 3-6.