

Northern Twilight: SUNY and the Decline of the Public Comprehensive College

by Robert Golden

It is the year 2050, and Plattsburgh, New York, looks much as it has for the last 60 years. There are still more bars downtown than anyone would believe possible, though a couple have been replaced by medical marijuana dispensaries—New York having legalized medical marijuana in 2023. Although the winters are now less severe than they used to be, Plattsburgh is right below the Canadian border and is certainly not tropical. There is local private industry in Plattsburgh: paper mills, Canadian firms that find it advantageous to have a U.S. address, firms specializing in cross-border trade, an airport that offers comparatively cheap flights to Florida or Las Vegas for frozen, fun-seeking Québécois. Many people in Plattsburgh, however, work for a government or non-profit institution: the hospital, the border patrol, the New York State prison system, the SUNY comprehensive college or the local SUNY-affiliated community college. Despite the hospital and the two colleges, Plattsburgh remains an essentially blue-collar town in a beautiful setting with mountains not far away on both sides of the lake. “Charming” is not the first word that comes to mind, but Plattsburgh has a certain indefatigable funkiness. Despite all, it will endure.

At the SUNY College the campus looks much the same as it has since the business, economics, and computer science building was completed in 2013. Much of the campus was built in an intoxicating surge of construction in the 1960s and ‘70s, and the hangover—otherwise known as critical maintenance—has lasted ever

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since. Although the college looks much the same and keeps the same impossible legal name—the State University of New York College at Plattsburgh—the college is very different from what it was even 30 years ago. The college no longer has a president but a senior branch manager—the president’s opening address was replaced several years ago by the chancellor’s statewide “University Welcome.” What used to be the provost and vice president for academic affairs position is now called the associate senior branch manager for academics, or ASBMA and the administration and finance vice president is now fondly known as the ASBMAF. There is a small core of about 50 faculty on term appointments (five years) to serve

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a student body of about 6,000 that was once served by a core faculty of about 300. Instead of this larger faculty in the back-when, most contact with students comes from content facilitators, or CFs. These CFs are the students’ local contacts for the MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) that dominate the curriculum. The CFs have the role of “facilitating” the content produced by faculty at SUNY research universities or at other research universities. Almost all of the general education program is offered through MOOCs, as well as large enrollment courses in all disciplines. In addition, there are a couple of wildly popular MOOC electives: *Sex and Dating at Mid-Century* and *Personal Finance after the Great Recession of 2045*. CFs are trained to facilitate the content delivered by the content producer; they are not to “confuse” students by suggesting alternative interpretations of the material or otherwise questioning the producers’ presentation of the material. The CFs do not actually grade students, indeed individual grading is relatively rare these days. Students advance in their studies by meeting carefully defined learning objectives set by the system. Their meeting these objectives is assessed through statewide Learning Outcomes Metrics Analysis, or LOMAs.

At SUNY Plattsburgh in 2050, many of the academic support operations have minimal staffing, with all the other work that has not been computerized being done at SUNY headquarters or at other centralized locations throughout the state. In the registrar’s office, for example, two people staff a window where students may come with a problem that cannot be readily solved through web voice-image transmission (people no longer phone one another; they “WVIT.”) An attempt was made a few years ago to eliminate the presence of any on-campus staffing in the registrar’s office through the use of a real-time WVIT system that students could access through their Tracies (powerful communication devices worn on their wrists, named after the then-magical wrist watches of the cartoon detective Dick

Tracy) or kiosks in the student center. However, there were technical problems with the system and one outraged student destroyed a kiosk. Similar incidents occurred at several SUNY campuses and some on-campus human presence was reintroduced, in the hope that the students were less likely to smash a real person than a machine. The chancellor's office has denied that it intends to shift its back office operations for academic support to Nigeria, the current low cost port-of-call for firms seeking to reduce costs to the bare minimum. All routine calls are handled through the automated system anyway, where an almost life-like smiling image named Sibyl answers student questions.

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The library at the college now consists of the archives and a reference desk that is as minimally staffed as the registrar's office. There are a few physical books on display but most of the AFs ("antiquated forms") are held in a storeroom off campus until digitalization is completed for the books not already digitalized through SUNY or other digitalization projects. Fund raising is still done at SUNY Plattsburgh; indeed, it's more important than ever in terms of the amount of support it is expected to provide for the college. But with so few faculty, the students' sense of allegiance to the college comes largely through the athletic teams. The senior branch manager realized soon after being appointed that a significant part of her job was to attend athletic events and cheer at appropriate times. The ASBMA is not all that interested in athletics but realized that with most curricula and learning outcomes strictly controlled by SUNY, he actually has relatively little to do. He is a lepidopterist and spends as much time as he can away from his office studying butterflies of the Adirondacks. There are rumors he has not been in his office in the last two months, but these rumors are vigorously denied by college spokespersons speaking off the record.

Although SUNY Plattsburgh is functioning—the hockey teams keep winning most of the time, the bagpipers still play at commencement—not all is well. The college is efficient in its operations and probably cheaper to run per student than the college of 35 years ago, but the academic results are mediocre. Students must meet the prescribed learning outcomes in their courses, but few students excel, even by the questionable standards of the outcomes. Even though students can take their LOMAs several times to pass, attrition is high. Behavioral problems among students are by any measure worse than they ever were in terms of vandalism, binge drinking, drug abuse, sexual assaults, and general mayhem. The chancellor has appointed a statewide task force to study the problem and make recom-

mendations. He is confident that in this realm, as in so many others, the problem can be solved, the situation brought under his control.

BACK FROM THE FUTURE

This scenario for 2050, of course, says more about the present than the future, which despite all our efforts to pretend otherwise remains essentially unknowable. After observing the “surprise” implosion of the Soviet Union and the mostly unpredicted economic collapse of 2008, I am dubious about very precise predictions of the future. But it’s safe to say that if present trends continue, the SUNY

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Plattsburgh of 2050 will look rather like the one described above. The trends that will create this new version of SUNY Plattsburgh are firmly entrenched and well known to even a casual observer: the decline of full-time faculty, the rise in the numbers of contingent faculty, the increasing use of MOOCs, and the growing importance of technology in support services as well as the centralization of those services in some public systems such as SUNY.¹ What may not be so obvious is the decreasing power and autonomy of campus-based administrators. Yet, as one senior SUNY administrator once remarked to me about SUNY campus presidents, “These people think they’re big shots, but really all they are is branch managers.” Now the status of campus presidents within public systems may not be an issue that elicits concern from most faculty, but if the president of a campus is a mere branch manager, then what are faculty? Are they any better off talking to an empty suit than to someone capable of making at least some key decisions?

There is of course the tendency of faculty to see senior administrators (presidents, vice presidents and deans in particular) as perhaps not enemy space aliens but as at least members of a group with sometimes sharply conflicting interests from those of the faculty. This sense of separation is especially true for presidents and vice presidents, since at least some deans are seen by faculty as representing their interests in administrative circles, and it’s true that representation of those interests is a significant part of a dean’s role. To some degree, even the provost or academic vice president is seen as representing faculty interests when he or she is not seen as being placed on earth to thwart the legitimate requests of the dean for more faculty resources. Presidents, however, owe ultimate loyalty to those who hired them: either the head of a state public system or the trustees. In varying degrees, faculty know the president has to balance the needs of the institution with the expectations of the community and the goals of those to whom the president

reports. Sometimes even comprehensive college presidents are seen as members of a distant managerial elite with primary responsibilities in public relations and fundraising and in making sure the college is run efficiently, with little interest in academics. However, if comprehensive college presidents are members of this elite, they are on the lower rungs of it in terms of income, perks, and actual power. They are not earning the truly big bucks or getting the perks of an increasing number of research university presidents, do not have the large staffs, and do not have convenient places to hide from the consequences of their decisions or the decisions made for them in a system office. Most come from the faculty and some expect to

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return to that role; they were not born with the desire to become an administrator. If they are effective, they will see themselves as a member of a community with certain norms and expectations that cannot simply be reengineered by fiat. If they are ineffectual in quickly launching local initiatives to help the college or sounding the alarm when proposed policies made elsewhere will hurt it, the faculty will lose along with the entire institution.

The reality is that faculty and campus-based administrators are in the same boat, even if they don't want to be, and this boat includes many, if not most, professionals in this country who all face increasing challenges to their autonomy and professional judgment. Unwilling and unhappy passengers in the boat include judges handing out mandatory sentences, doctors following increasing rigid protocols dictated by insurance companies or health care organizations, and bank managers in small town America who used to be bank presidents playing an important role in the community but who now (as far as I can tell) have almost no final say in any important decisions.² The list also includes junior military officers who feel they are micromanaged by their superiors.³ K-12 teachers may not even be in the boat, given that the U.S.—to its detriment—has never fully accepted that K-12 teachers are professionals anyway.

What these and many other professionals face today is a questioning of the role of professional judgment, a shrinking of the space formerly granted to professional autonomy. This shrinking is an assault on the very core of what it means to be a professional. Aside from advanced training in a specific field, latitude for judgment is probably the defining characteristic of a professional: professionals are people to whom society has granted a certain elevated status and autonomy because the decisions they make often involve complex matters with no one "right" or easy answer. Professionals are not the only people in this society who have to

make these kinds of decisions in their job—farmers make them all the time, so do traffic police—but professionals are more or less defined by the social expectation that they will make such decisions and make them for the greater good.⁴ These decisions involve applying general standards of the field to a specific situation where the rules don't clearly apply, situations where values are in conflict (for example, consistency versus attention to particular circumstances, timeliness versus thoroughness), drawing conclusions based on evidence that is inadequate but the only evidence available, making decisions based on evidence that is adequate but not optimal (sometimes known as “satisficing”), or even making decisions

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based on the elegance of the solution, the aesthetic “fit” of the parts into a harmonious whole.

This autonomy carries with it a social responsibility. One of the classics on professionalism in a field, William Wickenden's *A Professional Guide for Young Engineers*, published in 1949, lists six characteristics of a profession, presented here in shortened form. According to Wickenden, a profession:

- 1) Renders a specialized service based upon advanced specialized knowledge and skill;
- 2) Involves a confidential relationship between a practitioner and a client or an employer;
- 3) Is charged with a with a substantial degree of public obligation;
- 4) Enjoys a common heritage ... to the cumulative store of which professional men [remember, this is 1949] are bound to contribute;
- 5) Performs its services to a substantial degree in the general public interest;
- 6) Is bound by a distinctive ethical code.⁶

One might want to add characteristics to this list, but note that of the six, five involve some form of ethical or social obligation. Interestingly, Wickenden does not list professional judgment as one of these characteristics, though it is clear from the book that he assumes it. Wickenden did not live in a more innocent age, but he did live in a time where professional judgment was more respected than it is today. He also lived in a time when community bonds were probably less frayed than they are today. He never states or implies that professional autonomy allows for either arrogance or arbitrariness. Indeed, as he describes the role of professionals the focus is on obligations, not freedom or rewards.

I should add that Wickenden adds to characteristic five immediately after

‘public interest’ the phrase “receiving its compensation through limited fees rather than through direct profit from the improvement in goods, services, or knowledge, which it accomplishes.”⁷ Evidently this criterion no longer applies to some surgeons or lawyers. In 2010, Texas A&M University issued a report that examined each individual faculty member as a revenue center: the report compared money brought in by the faculty member versus the cost of employing that individual.⁸ It is standard practice in higher education administration to look at departments this way, but so far few systems or institutions have dared to go so far as Texas A&M, at least publicly. While not the focus of this paper, an interesting debate could be

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had on whether merit pay in its purest forms is antithetical to professionalism. This argument is not much heard in the age of neo-liberal glorification of pay for performance.

FALLING FOR THE FLIMFLAM

So who or what is driving the agenda of putting professionals in a straitjacket? An article on the rigid performance system for British universities (yes, we are not alone and it is worse elsewhere) blames Harvard Business School for the current obsession with “performance scorecards.”⁹ There is, of course, a managerial elite in this society that believes in the “bottom line,” in quantitative measures as a way to judge the worth of almost everything, and is not very secretly contemptuous of any other way of looking at things. But this elite, as powerful as it is, could not succeed in imposing its vision on the community if the community itself—civil society—were not in such bad shape.¹⁰ As community bonds have weakened and common understandings about the value of education or obligations to others have deteriorated, a narrow set of quantitative measures have rushed in to fill the void. If we can’t agree philosophically on the purpose of K-12 education or on the standards that education should strive for, then it’s a lot easier for someone in the state education department to set a standard of 80 percent of students scoring at a certain benchmark on a certain test of abstract skills.¹¹

Although these trends toward ever more narrow quantitative accountability seem irreversible, I believe there is a quality of desperation to the enterprise. There is also an element of flimflam. Many state governments know their K-12 educational systems were designed for the 19th century and do not adequately prepare students to succeed as either workers or citizens in the 21st. Rather than making the decisions and long term investments to really improve the situation, such as

more time in school for students, higher standards and better working conditions for teachers, a more integrated curriculum, and effective career education for those students who do not want to pursue higher education, the focus is on more high stakes tests for students and schools, and punitive evaluation systems for teachers. I suspect many politicians know their fixes won't cure the problem, but the fixes have the advantage of being short-term, like election cycles, and capable of producing results that will be ambiguous enough for some form of success to be claimed. In higher education, the obsession with numerical competitive rankings fails to capture the individual purpose and complex reality of a campus and may in

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fact be leading to a stale homogenization of a system whose historic strength was its diversity.

The desperation and the flimflam arise from the ultimate futility of this enterprise. The world we live in is fluid, extraordinarily complex, and perhaps inherently unstable, prone to sudden and unpredictable changes. What is most needed to cope with such a reality are individuals capable of responding to complex and particular realities, in other words, professionals with enough autonomy that they can address these situations quickly and effectively. Even today, as the scorecards and benchmarks and new quantitative evaluative systems proliferate, there are signs of cracks in the system, as states like New York give back to judges the freedom to exercise more discretion in sentencing and even Texas, the source of so much of the latest round of the testing regime, moves to give at least high school teachers more autonomy.¹² Where these systems have been most rigid and aggressive, the results have often been disappointing and the methods used to address the problem unexpectedly costly. Even a strict cost-benefit analysis gives these programs a failing grade.

PRACTICAL ACTION IS NEEDED

So what is one to do? I confess that a part of me is tempted to follow the advice of the protagonist's grandfather in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as he advises his young and naïve grandson to "agree 'em to death and destruction," that is, regardless of what you really think, don't stand in their way, somehow carve out your own space to cope within the system, and wait for the zeitgeist to turn.¹³ However, this path is the path of a cynical passivism and regardless of how common it may be, it is not one to be admired or emulated. Besides, though this current obsession could eventually deflate as fast and thoroughly as an ill-fated high school romance, it will do a lot of damage in the meantime. And it may not col-

lapse, since its proponents will still have power and want to keep all the power they've got, even when the system they benefit from is clearly not working for anybody but them.

There are practical steps to be taken now by college faculty and others:

- 1) Do the research and present the results to the public. With regard to education, count the dead bodies from the reform efforts of the last 40 years and present this information to the public. Some intrepid souls, such as Diane Ravitch, are doing this already.¹⁴ In regard to the professions, more work is needed on "professionalism" and its relevance to the economy and

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society and large. I believe this work should be both empirical and philosophical (meta-empirical?). It would be best if the results were presented in a language bearing some resemblance to standard written English.

- 2) Take a careful inventory of the work we do and present this information to the public. Yes, we are experts in fields but our value lies less in our expertise that in our interaction with students as they work to master or least become familiar with this material. I don't think, by the way, that appealing to academic tradition or the sanctity of the ivory tower carries much weight with the general public. Such appeals certainly mean nothing to our opponents. Being defensive won't help either.
- 3) Engage local communities. Some of the efforts at centralization of resources and control will once again leave small cities, where so many colleges (especially public comprehensive colleges) are located, as the big losers. If the scenario for the 2050 SUNY Plattsburgh turns out to be true, the Plattsburgh area will have far fewer professionals in the community and the rural/small city culture of poverty will become even more pervasive and entrenched than it already is. Local leaders can be made to see the consequences of this centralization and they can be engaged to fight back.
- 4) Find allies in other professions. Organize conferences with doctors and other health care professionals, engineers, military officers, law enforcement supervisors, lawyers and judges. Remember, we may not be happy about these threats to our professional autonomy, but we not alone.
- 5) Have honest discussions with your own administration. Although the pressure and the inducements are on administrators to see themselves as a class separate from the faculty, most do not want to be hated, though the good ones know they will not always be loved. Their interests do not

always coincide with those of the faculty, but very few of them are willing to see their own institutions gutted by the state central administration. They can risk their jobs by speaking out publicly, but if they are any good at all they will have allies in the college council or local advisory board, in the local business community, and among local legislators who, regardless of their political leanings, do not want to see their communities further shortchanged. State systems have no control over these allies, and these allies can be very powerful in fighting back, as I believe they were against a recent SUNY “shared presidents” initiative.

Some may feel that the view presented here is too stark and too negative. The lives of many tenured faculty continue much as they have for the last 50 years despite the demands for “accountability” and the increasing work load for many of these faculty as they take on responsibilities that used to be performed by other tenured or tenure-track faculty. Aren’t state systems offices merely responding to pressure from state governments and others for higher education to become an engine of economic development to respond to the crisis of deindustrialization, declining living standards of the middle class, and the seemingly permanent unemployment or underemployment of millions of people who need full-time work with decent compensation? Some efforts at centralization, such as the pooling of library sources through SUNY Connect or other similar consortia, have been extraordinarily successful. And isn’t the point of the Internet that knowledge is readily accessible and no longer under the control of a privileged guild that serves as a custodian and gate keeper for an arcane knowledge, a knowledge that gives its grateful young recipients a dubious and undeserved social privilege?¹⁵

My response to these objections is yes, yes, yes, and yes, with a “but” added in each case. Yes, academic life for some seems normal, but the trends to dramatically undercut it or even sweep it away are clearly in place at many comprehensive colleges. Yes, state systems are responding to a very real crisis, but the response is not necessarily an intelligent one and can leave many small towns and cities in even worse shape. Yes, some efforts at centralization make sense and should be pursued, but the primary criterion should be educational effectiveness, not a narrowly defined economic efficiency. Higher education probably could save money by outsourcing academic advising to Nigeria or India. Do we want to pursue that option? Yes, information is now accessible to vast numbers of people, but there is a huge gap between making that information available and giving someone the skill to apply that information in a meaningful way. MIT’s putting the syllabus and course material for its electrical engineering program on the web does not make someone who accesses that material into an MIT engineer, as MIT surely knows.¹⁶

As a former and not entirely repentant dean, vice-president, and provost, I am certainly not arguing against the social responsibility of colleges and universities. Higher education has never really been an ivory tower, removed from the needs and tensions of the larger society in which it exists, and it never will be. But I would argue that we need to replace a narrowly defined and ultimately self-defeating “accountability” with a language and a perspective of community and responsibility to that community.¹⁷ Colleges and universities, including public comprehensive colleges,

need enough “social space” and autonomy to be able to operate effectively. The faculty in those institutions need to be honored for the professional judgment they bring to their work and to retain the freedom to use that judgment in the best interest of their students, their institutions, and their communities. [nea](#)

ENDNOTES

1. Many of these trends are thoroughly documented in studies of the current state of American higher education. See, for example, Jack H. Schuster and Marin J. Finkelstein, *The American Faculty: The Restructuring of Academic Work and Careers*, and Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy*. The focus of this essay is on public comprehensive colleges, but some faculty at elite research universities see an unbridled use of MOOCs as a long term threat to the entire profession. See the comments of Harvard Professor Peter Burgard on page 89 in Nathan Heller’s “Laptop U: The Ivy League’s online push.” And perhaps it is futile to say so, but I don’t regard myself as a Luddite or an enemy of the application of technology to education. Based on my own teaching experience, my experience as an administrator evaluating the teaching of others, and my reading, I just don’t see MOOCs as likely to be very effective academically for the vast majority of American undergraduates.
2. There is extensive literature on this issue in many fields. For an interesting article on the tension in medicine between professional judgment versus “evidence-based” medicine and protocols, see Colin Coles, “Developing Professional Judgment,” pages 3-10. On the decline of smaller, community banks, see “Economics focus: Rate of decline: What the consolidation of American banking has meant for its smallest operators.”
3. On micromanagement in the military, see Thomas Ricks, *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today*.
4. I will leave for someone wiser and braver than I the question of exactly who is a professional and who is not. Perhaps more jobs should be seen as demanding “professional” skills than are now recognized as such, but in an age of micromanagement many truly professional (autonomous) positions are under already under siege. Fancy titles may be handed out, but the reality is something else.
5. See Herbert A. Simon’s “Rational choice and the structure of the environment,” 129-38.
6. William E. Wickenden, *A Professional Guide for Young Engineers*, 50-51.
7. *Ibid*, 51.
8. Simon Head, in “The Grim Threat to British Universities,” (on page 61) discusses the Texas A&M faculty productivity report in his article on the British government’s research productivity scorecard for British universities. In Head’s view, in the U.S. the managerial focus tends to be more on teaching productivity rather than research, with the Texas A&M report an extreme example. If you are searching for grounds for optimism, note that I tried to find the Texas A&M report, but it seems to be no longer available.
9. Simon Head, 58-64.
10. I do accept the argument of Robert Putnam that community bonds in the U.S. have weakened over the last 60 years. See Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*.
11. Although I am far from being an expert on this matter, I believe areas of disagreement about the purposes of K-12 education include the questions of exactly whose history and whose version of the vernacular is to be taught, uniformity of expectations versus recognition of special needs or specialized career interests, and grouping students by grades or performance levels.
12. Jeremy W. Peters, “Albany Reaches Deal to Repeal 70’s Drug Laws,” and Veronica Zaragovia, “Now that ‘Ink’s Dry’ on HB5, Future of Texas Education Bill Secured.”
13. Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man*, 13.

14. Diane Ravitch has written a book on this subject, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*, and a series of articles in recent years in *The New York Review of Books*. See, for example, "School Reform: A Failing Grade."
15. Of course, the same point could be made about the availability of printed material after Gutenberg.
16. MIT Open Courseware, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
17. As one example of a narrowly defined accountability, take the increasing stress on graduation rates for community colleges, where at least in New York these rates are increasingly scrutinized by the press and explicit or implicit criticism made of community colleges with low rates, even though many students enter these colleges to take a few courses in a particular area, to earn a certificate rather than a degree, or just to explore whether college may be right for them. The specific purposes of these colleges become secondary to the scorecard results. See Jeffrey Lax, "CUNY Community College Graduation Rates Do Not Effectively Measure Student Success," 119-25.

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