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Overview

by Mary Ellen Flannery

I remember the first time I heard the word metrics. It was about a decade ago, and my then-boss said something like, “I’d like to see the metrics on that article…” I might have answered, “Well, I can tell you it’s about 30 inches…”

This was before journalists were judged by clicks, back when we talked about a story’s impact on a community or how hard it was to get that killer quote from that very elusive source. I am nostalgic, of course, but it seemed like we cared more about content and quantity.

In the world of K12 education, our colleagues who teach reading to third-graders or math to eighth-graders, but certainly not those who teach art, music, or appreciation for hard questions and thoughtful answers, have been dogged since the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001 by metrics of various kinds, usually propagated by for-profit, corporate testing companies.

Well, higher education has known for a long time about for-profit interests and how they would capture our scant public dollars. But the question of how you measure post-secondary learning or how well faculty do their jobs has new vigor on community college and public university campuses, fueled by state and federal lawmakers who want to know how to get “more bang for their buck.”

As new NEA President Lily Eskelsen points out in these pages, the question is cringe-worthy. Because the answer is so often terrifying! Many states, from Connecticut to Tennessee, have adopted performance-based funding plans that reward institutions for “achievements” that those lawmakers deem important. In Florida, for example, led by the recently re-elected Gov. Rick Scott (oh, Florida, again?!), lawmakers provide more money to public universities when their graduates earn more money. Got a graduating class full of petroleum or chemical engineers? You win! Those were the top two earning majors in 2014, according to ThinkAdvisor. Have a top-notch program for early education and elementary education majors? It’s possible a Florida institution could actually lose public funds for graduating too many low-paid public school teachers—or, even worse, for graduating students who end up in the ranks of contingent faculty.
But okay, let’s talk about numbers that really matter. In their article in these pages, Adrianna Kezar and Daniel Maxey reveal the wealth of research that shows how much faculty matter to student learning. It’s a relationship that’s well understood in K12, where yes, of course, everybody understands that the first-grade teacher actually teaches her children. But the fact is that faculty also matter hugely to student learning, especially among freshmen, first-generation students, and students of color or poverty. (These are the students, by the way, who look like America today.)

Once you understand that, let’s consider another number: The number of your colleagues who work for miserable wages, with no job security, and little access to professional development or structural supports. Do they have office hours? Rarely. Do they advise student organizations or mentor individuals? Can they develop the relationships that underlay student learning? I’m speaking, of course, about the legions of contingent faculty who constitute up to 80 percent of the faculty at some institutions. (Many would be better off working at McDonald’s, points out Thought & Action author Claire Boeck.)

I offer a few more figures that actually have something to do with learning: The 100 percent increase in faculty workload at California State University, Northridge, described by Martin Saiz in his article about class sizes, or the overall faculty-student ratios of 1:80 that would make possible a $10,000 college degree, as figured by Robert Oprisko. How about instead of measuring “output,” such as post-graduation earnings, we measure “input,” such as faculty resources? What are the numbers that actually count?

Here’s one last number that I hope will ring loud: The one in five college women who will be sexually assaulted during their years on campus. (Source: The White House.) Please read poet Kirsten Dierking and memoirist Laura Gray-Rosendale’s conversation about campus rape, and how their own experiences as sexual prey have affected their work as faculty and writers.

And then, consider what you can do—to make your campus safer, to help students learn, and also to push back on the relentless tide of for-profit interests in public higher education. This is, after all, a forum for thought and action. To that end, I direct your attention to two more articles in this issue: David Bordelon’s “How Do We Stop It” and Deeb Kitchen’s “Can Graduate Students Re-Energize the Labor Movement?” The first provides specific instruction on how faculty can stop it—the creep of corporatization on your campuses—while the second describes what we can learn from graduate student unions about effective organizing.

Mary Ellen Flannery is Thought & Action’s editor. She has worked for the National Education Association as a senior writer and editor since 2004. Previously, she reported on education for The Miami Herald.
Survivors on Campus: A Dialogue about Sexual Assault

by Laura Gray-Rosendale and Kirsten Dierking

At a conference last fall, I came across College Girl: A Memoir, a book by Laura Gray-Rosendale that tells the story of a brutal sexual assault she experienced as a college student. I purchased a copy, but it sat unopened on my desk for a while; I, too, had survived a brutal rape in college, and I wasn’t sure what kind of impact the book would have on me.

When I began reading in early January, my first thought was how familiar it felt; the material was difficult, and at the same time, oddly comforting. It made me feel less alone—less lonely—in my experience as a survivor. We had similar thoughts during the attack, similar experiences in the long recovery process afterward, and I too wrote a book about the crime (One Red Eye). Instead of retreating permanently from campus life, we both ended up as college faculty. I began to

Laura Gray-Rosendale, professor of English and President’s Distinguished Teaching Fellow at Northern Arizona University, teaches undergraduate and graduate classes in rhetoric and composition, visual literacies, discourses of autobiography, and cultural studies. For 16 years she has been director of the S.T.A.R. (Successful Transition and Academic Retention) Summer Writing Program for “at risk” students at NAU. In addition, she served as Chair of The NAU President’s Commission on the Status of Women. Laura has published more than 40 articles and book chapters. She has authored the following books: Rethinking Basic Writing, Alternative Rhetorics, Fractured Feminisms, Radical Relevance, Pop Perspectives, and College Girl: A Memoir. College Girl was named Book of the Year by Mountain Living Magazine, and also won the 2014 Gold Medal IPPY Award for Memoir.

Kirsten Dierking is the author of three books of poetry; Tether, Northern Oracle and One Red Eye. Her poems have been heard on The Writer’s Almanac and have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including Garrison Keillor’s Good Poems, American Places. She is the recipient of a McKnight Artist Fellowship, a Minnesota State Arts Board Grant for literature, a Loft Literary Center Career Initiative Grant, a SASE/Jerome Grant, and a writing residency at the Banfill-Loebe Center for the Arts. Kirsten teaches humanities courses at Anoka-Ramsey Community College. In 2009, she received the Building Bridges Award in Education from the Islamic Resource Group of Minnesota, and in 2011, she received the NEA’s Excellence in the Academy Award for the Art of Teaching.
wonder; how did Gray-Rosendale’s experience of violence affect her work in the classroom? What did she think about sexual assault reform on campus? I contacted Laura through her website and proposed an article written in the form of a dialogue, and she immediately and graciously agreed to participate. We conversed by e-mail over the course of the next four weeks, sending thoughts and questions back and forth.

Coincidentally, our first conversation occurred on January 22, 2014, the same date President Barack Obama signed a Presidential Memorandum establishing the White House Task Force to Protect Students From Sexual Assault. In April 2014, the task force published their initial recommendations, four steps that include conducting campus surveys, preventing assault (including engaging men in the process), helping schools respond effectively when an assault has occurred, and improving enforcement of existing legislation that applies to sexual assault. These are important actions that will help reduce the number of rapes on college campuses in the future.

And yet, the public conversation about sexual assault tends to revolve around reports and statistics, and too seldom reveals the personal dimension of this crime. In sharing this conversation with Thought & Action readers, I hope we will contribute to a public dialogue about sexual assault that recognizes the human cost (and courage) behind the reports and statistics. In higher education, many of those “statistics” are sitting in our classrooms and department meetings.

*Kirsten:* We have so much in common with our experiences, but one of the major differences in our stories is that your attacker was caught and prosecuted, while mine was never identified. I had desperately hoped that my attacker would be caught, and I used to fantasize about a trial, and a long prison sentence. I always thought that getting “justice” would have made my experience more bearable. But reading your story and the partial, watered-down punishment your attacker received (where he didn’t even have to acknowledge that he had committed rape), made me rethink my whole view on this.

*Laura:* “Justice” is a strange word in situations like ours, I think. I sometimes wonder: Is there ever really, finally, justice for any survivor of sexual violence? Perhaps you can confront your perpetrator. Perhaps you can even testify against your perpetrator in a court of law. Perhaps you can see your perpetrator serve jail time. Perhaps you can pursue a civil suit and seek some sort of other form of restitution. And these are good steps along the path to justice. But these steps can
never take away what happened to the person—the aftermath of sexual violence. Images and experiences from these violent acts will continue to haunt a survivor all of his or her life. They will never go away completely. I wonder about a term like “justice.” I wonder whether it’s ever really possible. Instead, I think we need to seek something like “coming to terms.” We have to face what happened to us, realize that no justice will ever be enough, and make our own uneasy peace with that, I suppose. I think that’s a very difficult thing to do.

Kirsten: I understand what you mean, and I’ve felt much the same. It’s an expe-

"I began writing about the rape in a creative writing class... And writing about the rape ended up being an absolutely vital element in my recovery process."

rience you have to work hard to learn to live with, and part of that may be dealing with the idea that the person who derailed your life will never be adequately punished for their crime. One of the things that really struck me in your book was that your assailant ended up pleading to a burglary charge. This seemed a little ironic, as rape has often been traditionally looked at as a crime against a man’s property, for example, stealing his daughter’s virginity.

Laura: Rape does have that awful history. In my case the perpetrator ended up pleading to burglary “in satisfaction” or in lieu of all of the other charges against him, including rape. This meant that the first crime one would see on his criminal record was burglary and not sexual assault. There are lots of rape cases that are still pled this way to get convictions. I am quite ambivalent about this practice. On the one hand, it helps to secure convictions when survivors are afraid to testify against their perpetrators. This is often the case when a survivor knows her perpetrator. On the other hand, it doesn’t acknowledge the real crime committed—sexual assault. And pleading a case as burglary “in satisfaction” has other impacts as well. Often rapists are treated like burglars in the criminal system, not like sex offenders.

Kirsten: That is a really disturbing practice. You know, if you hadn’t written this book, I wouldn’t have known about this issue. So let’s talk here a little about writing and trauma, and the importance of having these stories out in the public sphere. I was recently at a writing conference where I served on a panel that discussed writing about trauma in college, and I was surprised to learn that some writing programs do not allow students in their composition courses to write on trauma-related topics. I understood their reasoning, in that they felt that composition instructors weren’t necessarily equipped to deal with traumatic issues, however, I found this troubling. I began writing about rape in a creative writing class, and I was absolutely terrified at the time about “going public” with the topic.
Indecision is by Karen Savage-Blue, an adjunct professor of art at Fond Du Lac Tribal and Community College in Minn. For more, visit www.ksbluearts.com.
My instructors were hugely supportive (granted this was in graduate school), but I think if an instructor had shut me down at that point, I would have been too frightened to try it again. And writing about the rape ended up being an absolutely vital element in my recovery process. What do you think of this? I know you also had an instructor who worked with you in writing about sexual assault, and although your work was academic in nature, you seemed to feel that this played a key role in your healing process as well.

_Laura:_ Yes, I had an instructor who helped me a great deal, Dr. Linda Alcoff,

**Writing about one’s experiences artistically and using writing as therapy are two radically different things.**

**And survivors need places to do both.**

who is now a professor of philosophy at Hunter College. I think that in any writing class it’s important that students find their own voices and write about what they know. For many survivors of sexual violence they cannot find their own voices unless they write and speak about these kinds of experiences first. I don’t mean that they need to write about them to get it over and done with so that they can move onto something else either. Instead, they need to make sense of what happened to them and write about it because it suffuses everything they do, everything that they are. I do think that writing teachers, however, need to have ready access to information about counselors for their students.

In addition, writing about one’s experiences artistically and using writing as therapy are two radically different things. And survivors need places to do both, I think. The artistic writing is for the classroom. The therapeutic writing may be more for journals and other private writings. Inevitably what gets written in those private journals will also inform what gets written in the classroom and vice versa. But I don’t think it’s really possible to keep traumatic experience entirely out of the writing classroom. This is something of a fallacy, really. Students need to write about what matters to them so that they can be passionate about what they are writing. And often what matters to them are the more complex and difficult things they have experienced.

_Kirsten:_ I would just like to give a “shout-out” here to all the professors and instructors who hear stories like ours, and all the other difficult personal issues that students are dealing with, and who do something, anything to help, from referrals to counseling, to mentoring, to a simple “I’m so sorry you had to go through this” penned in the margin of a paper. From personal experience, I can say that you are real life savers.

Speaking of writing classes, and considering that we both deal in words for
a living, both as writers and as instructors, what do you think about the word “victim” as it relates to rape? For me, while I think the term survivor is a good one, I also don't have any problem with the word victim. To me, to be a victim of a crime means that this was something you couldn't stop from happening, and I feel like that’s exactly true with rape. But I also think this illustrates that rape is viewed differently by society from other crimes, even with language. People don't think twice about saying they’re the victim of a violent robbery, or a mugging, or an assault, but when it’s a sexual assault, even the word victim has connotations of shame or blame.

Laura: That makes a great deal of sense. But I also fear that using a term like “victim” risks robbing a survivor of sexual violence of his or her own agency. Instead, it can make the story of sexual violence one about a person to whom violence is done and gives that person no other identity. Using a term like “survivor” confers agency on the person who has been through sexual violence. It allows him or her to gain control over the narratives told about the event and the experiences she or he has had. It also acknowledges the truth of the situation. One who has been sexually assaulted has survived a near death experience and lived to tell about it. It acknowledges sexual assault for what it really is—a supreme act of violence against another human being that dehumanizes her or him.

Kirsten: I was attacked on a college campus in 1983, and I believe your attack happened in the late 1980s. We both had odd, and unsupportive (to say the least) run-ins with college administration. In your case, you had a university administrator call you on the phone to tell you how much your attacker’s family had done for the institution. In my case, when I withdrew from that school immediately after the rape—which took place in college housing—the college initially refused to refund my tuition money, even though classes hadn’t started yet for the semester. My dad had to take me to meet with an administrator, who took one look at my beat-up condition and approved the refund, but I still remember feeling humiliated by what felt like an inspection. I guess my question is: Do you think college administrations have changed or improved their attitude in regard to sexual assault?

Laura: Thankfully, I do think the roles of college administrations have changed quite a bit. I’d like to think that this has to do mainly with changes in the campus culture around rape issues. And I do think that this plays a significant part. Student activists have done a tremendous job of making these issues highly visible.
locally on campuses and at a national level as well. But the changes also clearly have a great deal to do with the shifts in laws and protocols. In other words, these changes have been mandated. Things like “The Dear Colleague Letter” and Title IX made huge shifts initially. The Campus SaVE Act promises to continue this. And, Obama’s recent choice to elect a Task Force to investigate sexual violence on college campuses will demand further changes. However, there are still many survivors out there who are not seeing justice served by their universities and are being forced to take their cases to the federal government. Until we see a more wide-reaching set of changes on college campuses that uphold specific standards for how perpetrators will be sanctioned by universities, I think this will continue to occur.

Kirsten: I agree with you, things have improved, some of it due to mandates, and much of it due to activism. I know there is also a strong movement on many campuses to work on violence prevention. Both of our campuses participate in the Green Dot program, which encourages people to speak up whenever they encounter violent behavior or language. I think all of these things help. Yet when I speak with college students on campuses, I realize that very often they don’t report that they have been raped, particularly if it is acquaintance rape. Some have mentioned to me that they don’t want their parents to find out, that they’re afraid their parents will make them move home, or they don’t want to confess that they had been drinking, or something of that nature. And I have heard other survivors say that rape survivors should do whatever they need to do to get through the experience, and sometimes that means not reporting a rape. While I know that reporting rape can be difficult, I always try to emphasize how important it is to report the crime, but maybe this is a little hypocritical of me as I had no choice in reporting my rape to the police or going to the hospital—the police showed up, I was in shock, and simply went along with the process. I’ve always been very, very glad the assault was reported, but I can’t say that I consciously chose that at the time.

Laura: I didn’t make a conscious choice either. But I completely agree with you. Reporting an act of sexual violence is so important. Research shows that most of these perpetrators are repeat offenders. Though it can take a great deal of courage to do this, if one person reports a sexual assault it has the possibility of preventing many other sexual assaults from happening as well as allowing other survivors to have the courage to speak up.

Kirsten: I was attacked the week before school started, and I ended up withdrawing from that school and returning to my old campus, a couple states away,
where I started classes right away again. You also stayed in school, but at the same campus. First, how did we manage to stay in school at all? And secondly, I was frightened much of the time I was on campus, imagining my attacker had tracked me down and would kill me, as he had promised. I don’t know how you did it, staying on the same campus, the courage it took to do that is extraordinary. If my only choice would have been to remain on that campus where I was attacked, I know I would have dropped out of school.

Laura: I understand your decision completely and nearly made it myself. I was very afraid too. He had threatened to kill me. And for part of the time that I lived in Syracuse after the assault, he was on bail and wandering the streets. Still, I felt a deep need not to let the perpetrator have any more control over my life than he had already taken. I didn’t want him to derail my hopes and dreams for my life. I guess I felt that if I left Syracuse, I would have been letting him have further control over me and my life. And I wasn’t about to let that happen. I was also quite angry about what he’d done to me, who he was, his family’s connections to the university. It turned out that he was the grandson of the president of the Board of Trustees at my university. I did not want to be chased out of that city by him or by them. Instead, going back was a kind of reclaiming of my own life. There were many times I thought to drop out—but I had a great, supportive group of friends there as well as mentors and I think they saw me through those rough patches. My family also supported my decision fully.

Kirsten: My family and friends were also really supportive, and having that support system is vital, I think. And, sometimes, crucial support comes from the community. In the immediate aftermath of the crime, the police officers and hospital workers were all very kind to me, and there was a volunteer at the local women’s shelter who somehow got me through that tough first day. I’ll never be able to repay her for that. But I do think about how I can contribute something positive to the community in my own way, and this leads me to our work as teachers: do you think your experience affects your work in the classroom?

Laura: I have had several conversations about this with fellow survivors who are teachers. And we have realized our teaching shares more traits than we might have imagined.
students’ voices in mind, to make our classrooms open, safe, and free spaces for the exploration of knowledge. One of my fellow survivor friends, a sociologist, believes it has made him more pragmatic in the classroom, made him provide more real-life situations for students. Another, who works in psychology, believes it has made her more able to connect with students who come from difficult backgrounds or who are facing struggles of their own. She feels she can make the study of psychology come more alive for her students because she has faced traumatic experiences herself.

Being a survivor is not something I disclose in my classroom. But it probably impacts many of the things I do. I create assignments that allow student investigation and discovery. My assignments are student-driven and student-centered. I also use a facilitative teaching style. Though I bring specialized expertise to the table, I am not the only expert in the room. My teaching style is all about honoring students’ perspectives and helping them to communicate these perspectives most effectively. I suppose I teach this way because as a person and a survivor, I wanted and still want to be treated this way myself.

Kirsten: I love what you said here, and I agree. I think, or at least I hope, that it has made me more aware of the student who is on the verge of disappearing from college. I tell myself that maybe something as small as an encouraging word, or an offer of extra help might make a real difference. Sometimes students will confide in me that they have survived rape, or some other type of violence, and they sometimes tell me that just seeing me there in the classroom, demonstrating that I have built a good and happy life for myself, gives them hope. And I think we both do that - show that it’s possible to not just survive sexual assault, but to move through it and beyond it, and thrive.

ENDNOTES

1. The “Dear Colleague” letter of April 4, 2011, published by the United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, clarifies that “sexual harassment of students, which includes acts of sexual violence, is a form of sex discrimination prohibited by Title IX.”

2. The Campus Sexual Violence Elimination (SaVE) Act is a companion amendment to Title IX. It directly addresses sexual violence in higher education by requiring increased transparency in reporting of sexual assaults and crimes on campuses. It also enhances victims’ rights, standardizes institutional procedures in response to sexual violence, and supports sexual violence prevention through educational programs. Schools participating in federal student aid programs must implement the SaVE Act by October 2014.

3. A good source of information for faculty, staff, students, and other community members working to make their campuses safer is Not Alone, a web-based project published by The White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault. This website includes a wealth of resources, including legal guidance, information on developing sexual assault policies and procedures, and sexual violence prevention information. It also will help readers to understand individual and institutional obligations around FERPA (The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act), the Clery Act (also known as the Jeanne Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act), and Title IX. Numerous resources for victims and survivors of sexual crimes are listed here as well.
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“U"nless you’re in Taiwan,” I wrote in my introduction to my classes last year, “we won’t meet in person this semester.” I posted a picture from a trip my family and I took down the east coast of the island; behind me, steep mountainsides plunged into the Pacific Ocean. “This is my back yard,” I wrote. “Just kidding.”

I knew I was risking a bad first impression as a tourist in a t-shirt, but I didn’t know how to present myself to my students this semester. I could hardly believe what I was doing in the first place. As an educator, I want to have a “connection” with my students—I want to get to know them, listen to them, learn from them—but now I was as distant as I could possibly be, online and on the other side of the globe. When I look at this picture now, however, I see myself as yet unaware of how this unusual circumstance will change my perspective on what “connectedness” means, both as it regards my students, and as it regards the teaching and learning of my subject, Shakespeare.


What brought my family and me to Taiwan is that my wife, a Ph.D. student, got a grant to study Chinese. We have two children, a daughter who was then 15 months and a son who was then four, so this was the last year we could re-locate without the added question of where he would go to school. I don’t have any on-campus obligations as an adjunct faculty member, so my boss allowed me to spend a year teaching online.

When you think of global, online education, the first thing that may jump to mind these days are MOOCs, the “massive open online classes” that are widely publicized (and criticized). My classes were not these, but rather, closer to what are now being called SPOCs—small private online classes. Enrollment is limited to the same number I’d have in the classroom, thanks to the efforts made by the college’s collective bargaining unit. This allows me to have frequent, personalized correspondence with my students—one or twice a week, at least.

This kind of class, argues Tim Goral in an article for *University Business* magazine, may actually outlive the MOOCs. The article quotes Anant Agarwal, the president of edX, one of the largest MOOC producers, expressing interest in small, private classes, which even he suggests is a more sustainable business model.¹

The British Broadcasting Company (BBC) has reported that edX, with Harvard University and University of California, Berkeley leading the way, are refining the SPOC model and plan this to be their next phase of online course development.²

Since their debut in fall 2013, there have been three SPOCs offered by edX. I contacted the company to ask what percentage of students completed the courses, but was not given access to the data. One edX professor, Brian White of the University of Massachusetts Boston, writes on edX’s blog that the results of his biology SPOC have been “extremely positive.”³ Otherwise, these few SPOCs have not been publicly assessed for retention rates or learning outcomes.

The SPOCs do seem promising, but much seems promising in the light of studies such as the one from the University of Pennsylvania, which found the drop-out rate for its MOOCs was a staggering 96 percent.⁴ Also, as Natalie B. Milman suggests in the journal *Distance Learning*, SPOCs seem promising simply because they are what colleges like mine have been doing for years with online education: limiting enrollment, using teaching tools and methods that are known to work, and providing a good education by understanding and meeting student needs.⁵

As an online teacher, I appreciate this shift in the conversation around online education. In classes such as mine, the “massive” element is not the students, but the subject, the power and possibilities found in Shakespeare’s plays. The students, instead, not as a “mass” but as a collection of individual learners, can be the tight and narrow focus of the teacher’s attention.

That said, the question remains: What is exactly “in focus” in an online class, MOOC or SPOC, when the student is never seen? The answer, I found, is in the work that the students and I do together.

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After a few jet-lagged weeks in the tropical heat of Taiwan’s late summer, the semester started and so did my family’s routines. In the early morning I’d ride my rusty-trusty bike alongside the enormous Da An Gongyuan (“park of great peace”) to the public library, an eight-floor concrete tower filled with fake tropical plants and, on its upper floors, rows of four-person tables which, on the weekends, are filled by improbably quiet high school students poring over their textbooks. I find a seat, and once more into the breach, dear friends: another day of work. I log on to Blackboard to see how my Shakespeare students in Michigan are doing.

Except they weren’t all in Michigan. On the second day of class, under my introduction, a student wrote that he was in the Philippines, about an hour’s flight away from me. Another student was in Germany. Others were spread out all over Michigan and the United States.

I also got a response to my picture.

“Is it in Hualien?” a student wrote.

It was. She wrote that she was from Taipei, and currently lived in Ann Arbor. This was my first eye-opening experience as an online teacher overseas: I thought I was doing something groundbreaking, unheard of, even daring. Well, it was all these things, for me, but actually, I was only catching up to what many of my students are doing, and really, I’m embarrassed to have been so surprised. Of course I had known that the student body at my college was geographically diverse. Students “live” at the addresses brought to the Student Center to “establish residency,” but their capital-H Homes are another world away. The student in Germany was caring for her grandmother; the student in the Philippines was on an extended visit to his in-laws. My Taiwanese student had been in Ann Arbor for three years, she wrote, and added that having her instructor be from Ann Arbor but now living in Taipei was “so weird.”

With my eyes newly opened, my perspective changed. I had been a teacher of international students, but I had never felt like an international teacher. Now I was, and a surprising sense of feeling “connected to my students” came with it.
“Rope Swing” is from Swimming Holes, a series by James Fossett, assistant professor at the State University of New York, New Paltz. For more, visit www.jamesfossett.com
AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE INFORMS PEDAGOGY

Becoming an “international teacher” influenced my Shakespeare pedagogy in one significant way: what I learned from, and how I have come to appreciate, ELL (“English Language Learner”) students. In large part this was because, for the second time in my life, I saw the world as a language-learner myself. I had taken Spanish from middle school through college, where it became my minor, entirely earned by a semester in Madrid. My experience in Spain and with Spanish however (and in America with English, for that matter), prepared me little for even the most basic, conversational Chinese.

To explain what I mean, I’ll only make a comment on one aspect of pronunciation. In Mandarin Chinese (the official dialect of Taiwan and mainland China), there are four tones: A high tone, a falling tone, a low or “dipping” tone, and a rising tone. Is the distinction important? Well, tāng is soup and táng is sugar. Mā is mother and mă is horse. If you don’t want to insult your mother or order sweet-and-sour soup for your coffee, yes, the distinction is important.

My ELL students in Shakespeare are at a much higher level with their English, of course; I was a beginner, and my students have to test into “college-level reading and writing” status on the ACT-devised placement test, along with native English speakers, to be able to enroll in any literature class the college offers.

Shakespeare, however, presents texts beyond what anyone has been mastering. For example, Othello says that Desdemona’s father,

[... ] loved me, oft invited me,
Still questioned me the story of my life,
From year to year, the battles, sieges, fortunes
That I have passed.
I ran it through even from my boyish days
To th’ very moment that he bade me tell it,
Wherein I spoke of most disastrous chances,
Of moving accidents by flood and field
Of hair-breadth scapes i’th’ imminent deadly breach,
Of being taken by the insolent foe
And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence
And portance in my traveller’s history....

(Othello, 1.3.128-138)
There are shortened words that are somewhat recognizable—“oft,” “i’th’,” “scapes.” There are words like “portance” and “bade” that may be clear in context—but maybe not, when the context includes words like “accidents,” “passed,” and “chances” in ways we don’t typically use them. There are also obscure words like “breach” and obsolete words like “thence.” It all adds up to a challenging read, to say the least.

Very few students come to the class with a good amount of experience with Shakespeare’s early modern English. One of my students was a middle-school English teacher who, with her students, staged Shakespeare plays every year, and she took my class for her teacher re-certification. She didn’t say that she struggled with the readings, but when I ask on the first discussion board of the semester what was challenging about the reading material, everyone but her understandably complains and commiserates.

The lexicon presents an added, formidable challenge to the ELL student. A Turkish student, for example, e-mailed me to say he doubted he had the language skills to stay in the class. For the first play we read, he used some “modern English” translations he had found online, but he struggled even with that text. He then found modern-day Turkish translations of Shakespeare, which helped with his reading, but not his writing, the text that is most important of all, because this is the text with which he earns his grade. So, his extra work meant he could succeed as a reader of Shakespeare, but not yet as a Shakespeare student in my class.

“If students are learning the language, as a teacher you can draw on the strength they already practice: translation.”

“How can they offer their own ideas about the play when we can barely read this language?” This was a question posed by a Kazakh teacher to Mary Jo Kietzman, an English professor on a Fulbright scholarship to teach literature in Kazakhstan. In an ethnographic personal essay of her experience, published in the journal College Literature, one of Kietzman’s responses is to have her students re-write passages of the play, both in their native language and colloquial English. If students are learning the language, in other words, as a teacher you can draw on the strength they already practice: translation.

Todd Heyden writes in The Journal of Imagination in Language Learning and Teaching that he too assigns his students to re-write passages or scenes from Shakespeare’s plays, and he even assigns ELL students to create additional scenes of their own invention. This, as he writes, allows students to make the “daunting” text “something of their own.”

I’d like to keep in mind that this process of translation to generate an interpretation of literature does not level the playing field between native and non-
native English speakers. Clearly, my Turkish student who is working with three texts does more reading than the majority of my students who say they work with two—Shakespeare’s and a modern translation. Extra challenges persist for these students, but the progress is remarkable, and the process is illuminating for the rest of us. As Gisela Ernst-Slavit and her research colleagues write in their article, “Changing lives: teaching English and literature to ESL students”:

Perhaps it will take a while before Ana [a case study in the article] can learn to use rhetorical and syntactic conventions or for her to understand that Juliet’s line “O Romeo, Romeo. Wherefore art thou Romeo?” means “Why are you a Montague?” and not “Where are you Romeo?” Yet, the challenges she and her teachers will have to face dwindle when we examine what Ana has to offer and what she has accomplished in such a short time.9

This was my experience with my Turkish student too; he stayed in the class, our challenges dwindled, and he did quite well. I only conveyed to him what I must now add to the Ernst-Slavit article: native English speakers also have to learn that “wherefore” means “why,” and not “where.” To the Kazakh teacher I am compelled to respond, we native English speakers can “barely read this language.” In response to Todd Heyden, we too need to make the “daunting” text “something of our own.”

TRANSLATION BEGETS COMMONALITY

What came to light for me teaching Shakespeare in Taiwan was that translation, a necessary learning tool for ELL students, shows how my native and non-native English speakers have more in common than may first appear. In this light, my perspective changed to see how they also have something in common with me. The articles I’ve mentioned focus on classes in which all students are learning English. My Shakespeare classes contain mostly native English speakers, but everyone, regardless of origin or background, I’d like to classify as a “SLL” student: a Shakespeare Language Learner. This is not to say that Shakespeare’s “early modern” English is another language from the one you’re reading now. It’s not. However, when students frequently encounter words like “doth” and “’ere” and “wherefore,” the texts require translation.

For my students’ midterm and final essays I’ve offered the option of writing a personal, “modern-day” translation of a soliloquy or sonnet along with an analysis of the text, but I’ve found that you can use translation without even assigning it directly. Take my Turkish student’s situation: “to read, perchance to quote and analyze”—ay, there’s the rub not just for him but for all students. To write about any work of literature effectively, students have to quote and discuss the text they analyze. As they lead up to a quote like “Wherefore art thou, Romeo” and follow it, they have to contextualize the language and incorporate it in their writing. When this is done well, it demonstrates their understanding, their personal translation of the text.
It takes practice, and here is the great advantage of teaching literature online: everything they do in my class is written. Instead of having face-to-face discussions in a brick-and-mortar classroom, my students respond weekly to a prompt on a discussion board. They write their response and respond to each other, expanding on or debating with the ideas of their peers. I consider these “informal” assignments (I don’t take off points for organization, for example; I just want them to write out some ideas), but because everything is written, everything must contain quotations.

Earlier I asked what, in an online class, is “in focus if the student is never seen?” This is it: their writing, their quotations, their contextualization and interpretation of passages from Shakespeare’s plays, which is to say, their translation. This word itself, to “translate,” means to “carry across.” In my students’ weekly discussions, they don’t “re-write” Shakespeare as in the articles I mentioned above, but they carry his work across what often seem to be peaks and valleys of their learning process—their grasp of meaning and loss of it, their epiphanic interpretation and dismayed confusion—and into their own written work.

This awareness of translation also brings to light what my students have in common with me, and here again I found myself feeling a surprising connection to a common student experience. Those who have become reasonably accustomed to Shakespeare’s “language”—as my middle-school teacher was, and as I am—are still Shakespeare Language Learners in apprehending the great depth and variety of meaning found in his work. I’ve learned that “ere” means “before,” but with each reading of a play I continue to translate the staggering eloquence found in the lines he gives his characters. I’ll teach Shakespeare for as long as my boss will let me; I’ll be an SLL student for life.

CONCLUSION: A RENEWED HUMILITY

My first eye-opening experience teaching Shakespeare in Taiwan—or, more accurately, at a college in Michigan from a computer at the Taipei Public Library—is that my students were spread out all over the country and world. By the second week, I’m compelled to note, none of that really mattered. A few times I arranged video-office-hour meetings with students over Skype; this placed my students and me on the planet in real-time, because we had to accommodate the time zone differences. Otherwise, it didn’t matter what time zone anyone was in to discuss the problematic patriotism in *Henry V* and the idea that Hamlet may
be too insightful for his own good. We wrote each other about love and irony in Sonnet 18. We debated whether Lady Macbeth was an evil influence to her husband or gave him the murderous courage with which he thrived—tragically. We were students of Shakespeare, connected by the Internet, with no constraints to time and place. Because my online classes are “asynchronous” (that is, no one has to be logged in at the same time), our time and place was circumstantial, and inconsequential.

What was and continues to be consequential, as a function of time and place, are our backgrounds, particularly in regards to language. English Language Learners face a formidable challenge in a Shakespeare class, but this challenge casts light on a process that is integral to an appreciation of any literature. As writer and translator Eliot Weinberger writes, “every reading of every poem, regardless of language, is an act of translation: translation into the reader’s intellectual and emotional life.” In my life as a teacher, my online, far-flung year on an island in the South China Sea made me a student again: a student of Chinese, and an SLL student of Shakespeare. As both, my humility in the face of my students and my subject was renewed: a valuable teaching and traveling experience to have.

ENDNOTES
1. Goral, “Make way for SPOCS: small, private online courses may provide what MOOCs can’t,” p. 45.
2. Coughlin, “Harvard plans to boldly go with SPOCs.”
3. White, “An edX SPOC as the Online Backbone of a Flipped College Course.”
4. Stein, “Penn GSE Study Shows MOOCs Have Relatively Few Active Users, with Only a Few Persisting to Course End.”
9. Ernst-Slavit, “Changing lives: teaching English and literature to ESL students: to enhance learning for ESL students the authors provide selected background knowledge and strategies,” p. 116.
10. Weinberger and Paz, Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei: How a Chinese Poem is Translated, p. 43.

WORKS CITED


Faculty Matter: So why doesn’t everyone think so?

by Adrianna Kezar and Dan Maxey

In K-12 education, teachers are typically regarded as central to student learning and success. As a result, teacher education programs, standards and certification for teachers, as well as teachers’ professional development receive a great deal of attention and support from policy makers. It is fully accepted that teachers matter to student learning.

For whatever reason, the same assumptions are not always made in higher education. Whether faculty matter, as well as why and how, is not often considered by policymakers, the leaders of our colleges and universities, and other key constituencies in higher education. This lack of consideration is not without consequence, we believe. Because people do not understand the importance of faculty to learning, faculty roles have come under increased scrutiny from the public and policymakers, and the academic profession has been degraded in the public sphere. Moreover, a lack of understanding about how faculty members shape student learning has underpinned the rise of a mostly contingent academic workforce.

Today, 51.2 percent of all instructional faculty in non-profit higher education are part-time employees. Whereas part-time (or adjunct) faculty were historically professionals practicing in their fields of study, increasingly, institutions are hiring

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off the tenure track simply to save money. Typically, these individuals are paid far less than their full-time colleagues for the same work, and also lack access to institutional supports that would enable them to better help students. As we argue in this article, the emergence of the “new faculty majority” not only reveals the general lack of understanding around faculty’s central role in providing a high-quality education to students, but this shift also threatens to undermine one of the most important predictors of student success: frequent and high-quality interactions between faculty and their students.

A substantial body of research, conducted over more than 50 years, makes clear that faculty-student interaction is a key factor in promoting student success, particularly among those students who most need support, such as first-generation college students and students of color. This research is consistent, pervasive, and has informed the development of major surveys and projects in higher education.

By writing this article, we hope to remind our colleagues of the important ways that faculty facilitate postsecondary student learning and outcomes. We also suggest that higher education leaders communicate this research to external stakeholders and policy-making groups. Making use of these arguments can improve the support provided to the majority of faculty members today and also ensure that faculty continue to foster student success in the future. Major consideration should be given to the impact of current working conditions on faculty-student interactions, and how improving these conditions could enhance learning.

**The emergence of the “new faculty majority” reveals the general lack of understanding around faculty’s central role in providing a high-quality education.**

*How do students benefit from faculty-student interactions?*

Interactions between faculty members and students have long been shown to improve the quality of students’ learning and their educational experiences. The host of positive outcomes includes increased persistence and completion rates, better grades and standardized test scores, and the development of leadership, critical thinking, sense of worth, career and graduate school aspiration, and self-confidence. As Cox and others note: “No shortage exists of empirical studies of the nature, quality, and frequency of faculty-student contact and their educational consequences for students.”

Other practices, of course, have also been proven to promote student success, such as academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, and the existence...
of a supportive campus environment. Yet, studies repeatedly show that faculty-student interactions on their own have an independent impact. Additionally, the positive outcomes associated with frequent and high-quality contact between students and their professors remain relevant across the decades, even as campus and student demographics have changed dramatically. More than 50 years ago, institutions where faculty-student interactions were “normal and frequent and students find teachers receptive to unhurried and relaxed conversations out of the class” were identified as strongly impacting student learning. Since then, literally hundreds of subsequent quantitative and qualitative studies have said the same thing about the importance of faculty-student interactions. Whether it’s being a guest in a professor’s home or working on a research project with a faculty member, Kuh and others conclude, “In general, for most students most of the time, the more interaction with faculty the better.”

**PERSISTENCE AND OTHER OUTCOMES, ESPECIALLY FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR**

Many important outcomes have been associated with faculty-student interactions. Of these, persistence toward degree completion is one of the strongest. We know that the amount of time that students spend interacting with faculty, and the quality of these faculty-student relationships, effectively decreases student dropout rates and increases their persistence toward degrees. Studies also have associated frequent and high-quality interactions with better grades and performance on standardized tests—particularly for students with lower SAT scores.

And that’s not all. Researchers also have explored the cognitive and affective outcomes fostered by faculty-student interactions. Leadership ability and development, critical thinking and problem solving, self-authorship or the ability to define one’s capacity and identity, as well as better communication skills, sense of purpose, and character development—all have been linked to faculty-student interactions. Current studies suggest that quality faculty-student interactions make a difference not just in measurable outcomes, such as graduation rates, but in the breadth and depth of learning that occurs among students.

For students of color and first-generation college students, the positive effects of faculty-student interactions are particularly strong. Indeed, no other factor
plays as strong a role for students of color—making this a particularly important finding for our increasingly diverse institutions. Students of color note that faculty interactions encourage them to engage more with learning, try harder, and meet high academic expectations. For example, students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities have attributed their success to faculty and staff’s encouragement and support, while Latina/o students’ say faculty-interactions enhance their sense of belonging and their feeling that they are valued and “matter” in the community. Meanwhile, first-generation students who report positive interactions with faculty also are more likely to experience academic success (e.g., satisfactory grades and persistence) and express satisfaction with their academic experience.

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**WHY ARE FACULTY- STUDENT INTERACTIONS IMPORTANT?**

Underlying these different outcomes are several mechanisms that are deeply human and speak to the ways that interaction with faculty members promotes student success. Research on faculty-student interactions suggests how these relationships contribute to students’ aspirations, promote student engagement and a passion for learning, increase motivation to learn, boost academic self-confidence, and provide validation for students, all described below.

Various theories suggest learning is inherently social and support why faculty matter, including situated learning theory, social learning theory, and the most recent research from neuroscience. These theories are the most prominent and well-established theories of learning and explain how and why faculty-student interactions enhance learning.

**Student Aspirations**

Numerous studies have found that faculty play a major part in increasing students’ aspirations, including their desires to major in a certain area, their commitment to degree completion, and their desires to transfer from a two- to four-year institution or attend graduate school. For example, in a recent study in STEM [science, technology, engineering, math] disciplines, faculty-student interaction was the most significant factor in whether students decided to persist in their majors. Faculty can also help to encourage students to pursue careers that match their interests and skills.
Interest, Passion, and Motivation for Learning

Faculty have been shown to positively influence their students’ interest and engagement in their studies. Some of this has been attributed to faculty’s passion for their fields of study—it may encourage students’ interest and engagement. But whatever the reason, it’s true that faculty-student interactions increase students’ motivation to work on course materials or continue their studies. And motivation is one of the most significant factors in retention, student success, and degree completion.

Students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities have attributed their success to faculty and staff’s encouragement and support.

Academic Self-Confidence

Studies also show that faculty-student interactions, specifically the encouragement and support provided through those contacts, significantly increase a student’s own sense of academic ability and value. This is an important finding since students who lack confidence in their ability to succeed may also lack willingness to engage in their courses. Similarly, feelings of intimidation and inadequacy may prohibit students from fully participating in class.

Meanwhile, students who sense that their instructors care about them also have demonstrated increased levels of engagement in their courses, resulting in student success and retention. Faculty demonstrate their care for students by showing them respect and personalized attention, by valuing student contributions, and also by encouraging participation and inquiry in the classroom. When instructors validate and affirm students’ responses to questions, they also increase students’ willingness to participate and engage in class.

How Campus Policies and Practices Shape Faculty-Student Interactions

As we have shown, decades of research affirm the important role of faculty in promoting student learning and educational outcomes through frequent and substantive contact. However, as the composition of the faculty has shifted from mostly tenured and tenure-track to mostly contingent and part-time, scant effort has been made to ensure that the new majority of instructors are able to foster student success so completely. We are concerned that the practices and policies commonly faced by part-time faculty have the potential to threaten student success.

We know how institutional environment (e.g., resources, mission, student
body composition) can impact faculty roles and expectations (i.e., educational practices, behaviors, and productivity). The very nature of part-time employment suggests that these faculty will have fewer opportunities to engage with students in the meaningful and substantive ways that are integral to ensuring the positive outcomes associated with faculty-student interaction.

There are, however, many other working conditions that frequently reduce the capacity of part-time faculty to contact and form supportive relationships with students. For example, part-time instructors often lack office space where they can meet with students to provide support or feedback. When they are able to hold office hours, they are often not paid for that time. They may lack school-issued e-mail addresses that help to facilitate communication with students. Additionally, they are often excluded from the broader life of their campuses and departments, and may not be invited or encouraged to participate in activities or to serve as advisors for individual students or student groups.

It is important for administrators, faculty, and policy makers to understand and consider how policies commonly associated with non-tenure-track faculty roles and working environments impact student learning. In the sections that follow, we explore these issues.

**The Depth and Quality of Faculty Interactions**

Earlier studies focused on the frequency of contact between faculty and students and found more interactions to be related to greater outcomes for students. But, in more recent years, the purpose, depth and quality of student-faculty interactions has been found to be more important. This has been demonstrated in studies of students’ development of higher-order cognitive skills, and also of students’ motivation, aspiration, persistence and achievement. Specifically, more meaningful interactions, such as working with a faculty member on a research project or spending time together socially outside of class, are important in developing these outcomes. Faculty mentoring through undergraduate research programs, course-connected internships, and faculty-led student clubs all provide deep opportunities for faculty to interact with students—and also have been related to student success. More tutorial-style classrooms where faculty meet with students individually and interact with them each week are associated with greater student learning, as well.

Focused interactions appear to have a greater impact on knowledge acquisition.
and skill development than more casual contacts. However, informal and infrequent contact also is associated with persistence, increased graduation and student development. These interactions include talking after class about academic or personal issues, simple greetings, and advice about a major or job. In general, studies have specifically identified four qualities of a high-quality faculty interaction: (1) faculty members were approachable and personable; (2) faculty members had enthusiasm and passion for their work; (3) faculty members cared about students personally; and (4) faculty members served as role models and mentors.

It is important to note that part-time faculty are the least likely to have frequent interactions with students or deep relationships through undergraduate research, project work, or mentoring relationships since they are typically hired to teach only and may be on campus less frequently. They also are not often invited or encouraged to participate in departmental or campus activities, or to advise student groups, which denies them other opportunities to connect with students in substantive ways. Although they may be excellent teachers in the classroom, their working conditions make it nearly impossible for them to be as involved as their full-time peers in the lives of students and to provide those students with similar support outside of class. And while part-time faculty may be able to demonstrate some of the characteristics associated with high-quality faculty-student interactions, such as being approachable, their general inaccessibility or lack of engagement outside of class may make them seem to students to be distant, unsupportive, or unapproachable.

Availability of Professional Development

Faculty members who work off the tenure track tend to use less student-centered and active teaching approaches—the kinds of approaches associated with learning—and also fewer high-impact teaching practices, such as service learning, undergraduate research, and study abroad. Conversely, tenure-track faculty use more student-centered and engaging practices, like getting to know students and having more frequent and substantive interactions with them. While it’s unclear why part-time faculty use these positive teaching approaches less often, it is likely that their employment contracts and work arrangements exclude them from professional development, mentoring, and interactions with colleagues that would result in better teaching practices. When faculty are provided these opportunities, research has suggested a positive impact; indeed, a recent study of full-time non-tenure-track faculty recently found that non-tenure track faculty members who are
well supported and use strong teaching practices produce student outcomes that are comparable to those of tenure-track faculty members.  

The Importance of Faculty-Student Interactions in the First Year of College

We know that students are most vulnerable in their first year of college, and that faculty have a significant role in determining the success of students during this transition period. In various studies, students’ relationships with faculty predicted their academic competence in the first year of college and helped sophomores succeed as well, in terms of grades and satisfaction. Additionally, students’ earliest interactions with faculty shape their future relationships with professors and whether they even seek them out. When these initial contacts are not successful, students are less likely to pursue interactions later. Yet, first-year courses, particularly developmental courses that serve the most at-risk students, increasingly are taught by part-time faculty—the people with the least amount of time for the kind of interactions that we know help students most. This suggests that the prevalence of part-time faculty leading introductory courses may be an even greater problem than we imagined.

Openness and Accessibility

When students feel respected by their instructors or when faculty members make time for them and demonstrate care through personal attention or quick response to e-mail, students benefit. These signal to students an instructor’s accessibility, approachability, and willingness to support students’ needs. When students feel isolated or alienated from faculty or develop poor relationships with them, there are adverse outcomes: less motivation, lower aspirations, less satisfaction with college, a lack of engagement, and less persistence and student success. These risks are of particular concern for underrepresented minority students and women. One study found that students of color look for cues about faculty’s openness and accessibility in their in-class behavior and demeanor. Students in that study noted, in particular, that if posted office hours were not clearly available or were limited, students believed faculty did not want to interact with students.

Our growing reliance on part-time faculty not only undermines students’ chances for high-quality faculty-student interaction, but it also sets up these instructors to be less accessible and seem less welcoming, despite their own best efforts to serve their students well. When part-time faculty members are not pro-

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Our growing reliance on part-time faculty not only undermines students’ chances for high-quality faculty-student interaction, but it also sets up these instructors to be less accessible and seem less welcoming, despite their own best efforts to serve their students well. When part-time faculty members are not pro-
vided an institutional e-mail address or office space, students may have difficulty discussing their interest in course material, receive feedback on assignments, or get help. Similarly, when part-time faculty have limited office hours, it may signal inaccessibility. Also, because part-time faculty are often paid very little and may have their hours capped by their institutions, many work on multiple campuses to piece together a living wage. This means many instructors must rush out of class to drive across town for their next course, leaving behind or putting off students seeking help after class. Even when they are making efforts to be involved, part-time faculty may seem less supportive or approachable.

The prevalence of part-time faculty leading introductory courses may be an even greater problem than we imagined.

In-Classroom Versus Out-of-Classroom Contact

Most studies find that in-class interactions, particularly for students of color, have a stronger impact than out-of-class interactions on persistence, engagement, motivation, aspirations. This may be related to changes on campuses where students currently commute more, are older, and also less likely to participate in out-of-class activities. Nonetheless, a combination of in- and out-of-class activities produces the strongest outcomes for students. Again, this a challenge for part-time faculty, who typically spend limited time with students outside of class and are much less likely to be involved in student activities and co-and extra-curricular activities (e.g., leadership programs, student clubs, residential programming).

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

While it may always be necessary for institutions to employ some part-time faculty, there is growing support for action toward hiring more full-time employees—and with good reason. As we have shown in this article, faculty do matter. Study after study demonstrates that faculty contact and relationships with student are a critical key to student success. Students, parents, policy-makers and faculty should understand that full-time faculty employment would enable more faculty to undertake more frequent and substantive contact with students—the kind that has been found, time and again, to have a meaningful, positive impact on student success. Where part-time faculty are necessarily employed however, it is imperative that we take into account and find ways to address the limitations placed on these instructors—through no fault of their own. The research we have summarized here should be shared with various stakeholders within and outside higher education as we work together to improve the educational experience and success.
of our students. For too long, we have taken for granted that our leaders understand faculty’s value to learning, and the important role faculty have in our core academic mission. We need to share these findings widely and ensure that all faculty members can foster their students’ development through substantive faculty-student interaction.

ENDNOTES

1. See Darling-Hammond, “Teacher Quality and Student Achievement: A Review of State Policy Evidence” and “Teacher Learning that Supports Student Learning.”

2. See National Center for Education Statistics, “Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.”

3. The terms non-tenure-track faculty and contingent commonly denote both full- and part-time academic staff who are not on the tenure track; they are ineligible to be considered for tenure. This is not a homogeneous group. Individuals may have very different reasons for taking non-tenure-track jobs and the nature of work and working conditions can vary substantially, even on campus. Full-time, non-tenure-track faculty may be referred to as lecturers, instructors, or clinical faculty. Titles and formal classifications may vary by campus and might even differ among the numerous academic units at an institution. They typically work at one institution because they hold full-time appointments. Part-time faculty are commonly referred to as adjunct faculty. Depending upon their individual circumstances, some part-time faculty might work only work at one institution. However, they are more likely to have positions at multiple institutions and may aspire to full-time or tenure-track positions.

4. A 2013 salary analysis by the American Association of University Professors concluded that the average compensation received by a part-time faculty member teaching a three-credit course is $2,700. Additional details regarding non-tenure-track faculty working conditions and connections to student learning can be found at www.thechangingfaculty.org.

5. The term “new faculty majority” denotes the status of part-time faculty as the largest subset of the instructional faculty among nonprofit institutions in the United States. New Faculty Majority is also the name of an organization founded to improve the quality of higher education by advancing professional equity and securing academic freedom for all adjunct and contingent faculty. Information about the organization can be found online at www.newfacultymajority.info.

6. In our work bringing together accreditors, academic leaders, policymakers, and other important constituent groups in higher education, we have observed that there is not a well-grounded understanding of the research on faculty members’ impact on students or a clearly articulated rationale for why faculty are important to student outcomes and learning. The Delphi Project has created a number of resources that summarize research and contribute to building greater awareness about the connections between faculty and their working conditions and student learning outcomes, which are available on our website at www.thechangingfaculty.org.


9. In a study examining historical findings about faculty-student interactions between 1950 and 2000, Kuh and Hu found that the positive outcomes associated with frequent and high-quality contact between students and their professors remain relevant even as campus and student demographics have changed over time. See Kuh and Hu, “The Effects of Student-Faculty Interaction in the 1990s.”


13. It is important to note that studies control for incoming characteristics and other college experiences. However, there is no way to control for students who perform well or who are inclined to persist tending to seek out more faculty interactions. Finally, the effects of student-faculty interaction are conditional. For example, students who were better prepared academically and who devoted more effort to their studies interacted more frequently with faculty members. It is not clear whether this is because such students were more assertive in seeking out faculty members or whether faculty members invited students who performed well academically to make contact (e.g., writing laudatory comments in the margins of a student’s paper suggesting they talk further about the topic). See Kuh and Hu, “The Effects of Student-Faculty Interaction in the 1990s.”


17. See Lundberg and Schreiner, “Quality and Frequency of Faculty-Student Interaction as Predictors of Learning: An Analysis by Student Race/Ethnicity.”


19. Fries-Britt and Turner found that students attending HBCUs attributed their success to the encouragement and support they received from faculty and staff. See Fries-Britt and Turner, “Uneven Stories: Successful Black Collegians at a Black and a White Campus.” Similarly, research by Dayton and others suggests strong relationships with faculty and staff contribute to Latina/o students’ sense of belonging and their feeling that they are valued and “matter” in the community. See Dayton et al., “Hispanic-Serving Institutions Through the Eyes of Students and Administrators.”

20. See Amelink, “Predicting Academic Success Among First-Year, First Generation Students.”


23. See Hurtado, et al., “We do science here’: Underrepresented Students’ Interactions with Faculty in Different College Contexts.”


26. See Rocca, “Student Participation in the College Classroom: An Extended Multidisciplinary Literature Review.”

27. See Fassinger, “Understanding Classroom Interaction: Students’ and Professors’ Contributions to Students’ Silence,” and Weaver and Qi, “Classroom Organization and Participation: College Students’ Perceptions.”


29. See Blackburn and Lawrence, Faculty at Work: Motivation, Expectation, Satisfaction, and Fairweather, Faculty Work and Public Trust: Restoring the Value of Teaching and Public Service in American Academic Life, and “The Mythologies of Faculty Productivity: Implications for Institutional Policy and Decision Making.”


31. See Street, et al., “Who is Professor ‘Staff?’ And How Can This Person Teach So Many Classes?” For additional examples and information, please also see our resources at http://resources.thecangingfaculty.org.

32. See Pascarella and Terenzini, How College Affects Students.

33. Cox, et al., “Pedagogical Signals of Faculty Approachability: Factors Shaping Faculty–Student Interaction Outside the Classroom.”

34. See Arredondo, “Faculty–Student Interaction: Uncovering the Types of Interactions That Raise Undergraduate Degree Aspirations.”
35. See Hurtado, et al., “We do science here: Underrepresented Students’ Interactions with Faculty in Different College Contexts.”
37. See, for example, Kuh and Hu, “The Effects of Student-Faculty Interaction in the 1990s.”
38. See Komarraju, Musulkin, and Bhattacharya, “Role of Student–Faculty Interactions in Developing College Students’ Academic Self-Concept, Motivation, and Achievement.”
39. See Alderman, “Faculty and Student Out-of-Classroom Interaction: Student Perceptions of Quality of Interaction.”
40. See Baldwin and Wawrzynski, “Contingent Faculty as Teachers: What We Know; What We Need to Know.”
41. See Umbach, “How Effective Are They? Exploring the Impact of Contingent Faculty on Undergraduate Education” and Umbach and Wawrzynski, “Faculty Do Matter: The Role of College Faculty in Student Learning and Engagement.”
42. See Figlio, Schapiro, and Soter, “Are Tenure Track Professors Better Teachers?”
43. See Pascarella and Terenzini, How College Affects Students.
44. See Reason, Terenzini, and Domingo, “Developing Social and Personal Competence in the First Year of College.”
45. See Graunke and Woosley, “An Exploration of the Factors that Affect the Academic Success of College Sophomores” and Juillerat, “Assessing the Expectations and Satisfactions of Sophomores.”
46. See Reason, Terenzini, and Domingo, “Developing Social and Personal Competence in the First Year of College.”
47. See Hurtado, et al., “We do science here: Underrepresented Students’ Interactions with Faculty in Different College Contexts,” and Lindquist, Spalding, and Lundrum, “College Student’s Thoughts About Leaving the University: The Impact of Faculty Attitudes and Behaviors.”
48. See Cole, “Do Interracial Interactions Matter?: An Examination of Student Faculty Contact and Intellectual Self-Concept” and Komarraju, Musulkin, and Bhattacharya, “Role of Student–Faculty Interactions in Developing College Students’ Academic Self-Concept, Motivation, and Achievement.”
49. See Sax, Bryant, and Harper, “The Differential Effects of Student–Faculty Interaction on College Outcomes of Women and Men.”
50. See Hurtado, et al., “We do science here: Underrepresented Students’ Interactions with Faculty in Different College Contexts,” and Lindquist, Spalding, and Lundrum, “College Student’s Thoughts About Leaving the University: The Impact of Faculty Attitudes and Behaviors.”
52. See Kezar and Sam, “Understanding the New Majority of Non-Tenure-Track Faculty in Higher Education: Demographics, Experiences, and Plans of Action.”

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So the Student Says, He Who Skips Our Conference and Wants a New Meeting Time

by Paige Riehl

No excuses here. I’m at fault, he says. Job’s hell and life’s a narrow path. Work late, sleep late. No writing to show, he’s gum-snapping,

looking for another break. All these students with their colorful beanies, the way their shoulders lean into February. Okay, I say.

One forgets to read the assigned text and throws a desk against the wall. He exits into some endless hallway never to return.

Another says she responds to many names, doesn’t know who will attend class in her body. Calls herself we.

One stumbles into my office clutching paragraphs. Together we deconstruct and reconstruct nonsensical sentences like vascular surgeons.

Others bide their time. Filmy eyes and crossed legs. Phones buzz important in pockets. No questions. But today, he who skips conferences signs up for a new time tomorrow. He talks through my bathroom break. He is trying, is overextended, hopes I see the effort. My tired brain. My full bladder.

Little lightning streaks flash across my vision—ocular migraine—the body’s warning flashes above a churning sea. See ya tomorrow, he says.

Okay, I say—to the flying desk, the lightning, the buzzing pockets, the churning sea, the empty hallway. Tomorrow: okay.

Paige Riehl’s poetry chapbook, Blood Ties, was recently published by Finishing Line Press, and her work also has appeared in publications that include Meridian, Potomac Review, and South Dakota Review. She was selected by poets Jude Nutter and Oliver de la Paz as a winner of the 2012–2013 Loft Mentor Series in Poetry in Minneapolis. Riehl is a full-time English faculty member at Anoka–Ramsey Community College in Minnesota.
Can Graduate Students Re-energize the Labor Movement?

by Deeb-Paul Kitchen, II

In recent years, issues pertaining to graduate student union organizing have been at the center of several political battles and court cases. This attention is, at least in part, due to the growth of graduate student unions at a time when organized labor’s influence is receding in other, more traditionally unionized sectors of the labor force. As many unions struggle with decreasing membership and against well-funded corporate assaults on the rights of workers to collectively bargain, these graduate student or graduate employee unions, once disregarded as idealist kids or “radicals,” may provide an organizing model for American labor as it seeks to reinvigorate itself.

This new focus on graduate labor organizing comes at a time of transition for both organized labor and higher education. Increasingly, American institutions, even public ones—such as universities—are governed by a corporate logic that stresses efficiency and control. Within this framework, which elevates the interests of corporations above the public good, unionization has declined in terms of “density, organizing capacity, level of strike activity, and political effectiveness” across most sectors of the workforce. In 2012, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, union members accounted for 11.3 percent of employed wage and salary workers in the U.S., down slightly from 11.8 percent in 2011 and dramatically less than the 20.1 percent in 1983.

Deeb-Paul Kitchen is an instructor of sociology at Florida Gulf Coast University. His research on the graduate labor movement focuses on the organizing process and the work that it entails. Deeb is a former co-president of the University of Florida’s Graduate Assistants United.
And yet, despite these bleak figures, not all unions are struggling to survive. Even within this increasingly hostile anti-worker climate, some unions are adapting—even flourishing. As traditionally dominant union groups have receded, previously marginalized ones, such as migrant and temporary workers, have moved into positions of influence. Specifically, on the campuses of research universities from California to Florida to New York, unionization is flourishing among graduate employees.

I would offer to readers of *Thought & Action*, as well as members of unions across the labor spectrum, that the organizing model provided by graduate student unions should be embraced by any worker who wants to survive and thrive in this world dominated by corporate power. As both an ethnographic researcher and a former organizer and activist within the graduate labor movement I have seen this approach used successfully under these unfavorable conditions. In the face of budget cuts, union busting, and high rates of turnover, the organizing model has allowed graduate unions to increase membership, expand bargaining units, and secure more generous benefits. What is more, it enables labor unions to exert influence beyond the scope of these traditional labor issues.

**The organizing model provided by graduate student unions should be embraced by any worker who wants to survive and thrive in this world**

**GRADUATE LABOR IN THE AGE OF NEOLIBERALISM**

Research universities increasingly employ graduate assistants (GAs) to teach their undergraduate students and to do other work that used to be done mostly by tenured or tenure-track faculty. But they typically do this work for little pay, minimal benefits, and without job security.

Consequently, many GAs have collectively sought the same rights and benefits afforded their faculty colleagues and other unionized workers. The first GA unions were established in the 1960s, and after a few decades of stagnation their numbers increased sharply in the 1990s. This growth period corresponds with other changes within the academy, and more broadly, with the transition from an industrial economy in the U.S. to a knowledge- and information-based one—the third wave of marketization. Meanwhile, the 1990s also saw the ascension of neoliberal and neoconservative lawmakers to positions of power in state houses, where they promoted policies that stress higher education’s economic functions while devaluing its role in democratic learning, activism, and social criticism. At
the same time, these same legislators significantly reduced the public resources invested in higher education, particularly state funds. Restricted budgets have resulted in academic managers prioritizing short-term economic concerns: implementing policies that can potentially generate revenue and expanding the academy’s connections to states and private sector organizations, while deemphasizing and divesting from the humanities and liberal arts. This marks a departure from the classical view of the university, which dates back to the Greeks and Romans who saw the liberal arts as necessary to make a person free.

Predictably, most of graduate assistants who are willing to organize unions work in the humanities and social sciences. Graduate employees in these fields are routinely among the lowest paid on campus, while those in the STEM fields are the highest. In 2013, the average graduate assistant in all of the social sciences and humanities made below the national average for GAs. Also, within those fields, the reliance on graduate labor and time to degrees has grown the most dramatically while the chances of tenure-track employment upon graduation have sharply declined. But the varying popularity of unions in these different fields isn’t just a matter of pay or fate — it also illustrates their functions. In the social sciences and humanities, students learn to develop criticism and commentary on relevant social institutions. In a way, these economic shifts and policies have created the conditions from which their challenges emerged. This contradiction leads Rhoads and Rhoades to depict GA labor unions as simultaneously reflecting shifts in academia and challenging them.

GA activists see the growth of their unions, at least in part, as a reaction to these changes that “seek to alter the distribution of power within the academy.”

In addition to courting private-sector investment, universities also have been embracing the top-down methods of management associated with corporations—the chief powers in third wave marketization. Aronowitz claims these types of practices are the norm for most public and private schools. A recent report showing a sharp 28 percent increase in higher education administrators from 2000 to 2012 (and a 40 percent decrease in full-time faculty and staff) bolsters this claim. GA activists see the growth of their unions, at least in part, as a reaction to these changes that “seek to alter the distribution of power within the academy.” The specific reaction that has been engendered reaches beyond the ivory tower, however, because of the unique structure of graduate labor and its requirements for unionization.

In general, workers are more likely to organize unions when they have long-term attachment to their employers. But neither workers (GAs) nor employ-
ers (universities) see graduate employment as a permanent arrangement. From an organizing standpoint, this means graduate unions lose officers and activists regularly. What’s more, with incoming students every year, there are many new employees to educate about the union, and many obstacles to maintaining momentum garnered through activism from year to year. On top of those serious challenges, solidarity among workers from different academic departments, programs, and colleges often is strained by competition for diminishing resources.

In order to manage these dynamics, GAs have adopted a model of unionization that is typically observed among labor organizations in need of renewal. They have established “organizing unions,” as opposed to “service unions” that have traditionally dominated other campus unions.

**THE ORGANIZING MODEL**

Within the intra-movement dispute between “service” and “organizing” unions, graduate unionists see themselves firmly on the side of organizing. Because of the high turnover rates among graduate employees, their constant need to organize guides all graduate union activity. This is demonstrated in a document distributed among GA activists at the Alliance of Graduate Employee Locals (AGEL) conference in 2006.

Recently in the labor movement a division has been staked out between competing models of running a union: the service model union and the organizing model union. The service model is “by far the most widely used model of union organizing past and present,” and it differs from the organizing model in purpose and structure. Typically, service unions are centralized and directed by professional staffs. “Members pay dues to the organization and should it become necessary later to file a grievance, they receive this service... this is the extent of member involvement in the union.” Worker participation in decision making and agenda setting is minimal. They are expected to merely pay dues and let representatives know of...
On the other hand, graduate labor activists see unions as part of a participatory, democratic movement. Members still pay dues, but they actually run their unions. Activities such as contract negotiations, grievances, or political actions are valued as much as opportunities to incorporate more people in union action as they are for settling disputes and securing benefits. Collective action is valued above litigation, while efficiency is valued below member participation and communication.

For GAs, embracing the organizing model is a tactical necessity, but it also presents challenges. Specifically, they need opportunities to organize, or reasons to be active even when there are no grievances to be settled or contracts to be negotiated. In the absence of those typical “service” tasks, they must use the union apparatus to organize around issues beyond the traditional scope of higher wages, more generous benefits, and improved working conditions. As a result, graduate unions often form alliances with other activist and advocacy groups, and function as social movement unions that link the struggles of graduate employees to the pursuit of social justice.

Graduate unions are steeped in this movement. They first emerged from the Free Speech Movement and antiwar protests at the University of California, Berkeley in 1965 when graduate students, in response to campus policies that censored student activist groups, organized a chapter of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). As union members, with the rights and protections of organized labor, their activities could not be restricted by campus policies for existing student clubs or groups.

Today, graduate union organizers still recognize this 50-year-old dynamic in their own work. Nedda, an organizer with Graduate Assistants United at the University of Florida (UFGAU), talks about her union’s utility and value as being rooted in its right to directly communicate with its bargaining unit.

For GAs, embracing the organizing model is a tactical necessary, but it also presents challenges. Specifically, they need opportunities to organize.
Thousands of protesters packed the rotunda at the Wisconsin State House in 2011 to protest Gov. Scott Walker’s so-called “Budget Repair Bill,” which stripped public sector workers of their right to collectively bargain. Photo by Joe Rowley via Wikimedia.
Nedda: The reason something like that [protest] happened demonstrates a more settled value of the union—we have the ability to immediately organize because we have the communication network. I’ve also been a graduate assistant at a university that didn’t have a union and there was no way for graduate assistants to communicate with one another outside a moderated listserv, a listserv moderated by the administration itself. So just the ability to communicate to all graduates assistants through email, because we get an email list from the university as part of our contract, makes the union valuable. We have the ability to communicate and we would not have that if we didn’t have a union and that is a simple thing but it’s so valuable because we can address issues immediately.25

This capacity to communicate in unfettered and unfiltered ways makes a GA union a desirable group for potential collaborators. Consequently, various activist groups, such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) or the Black Graduate Student organization (BGSO), seek the GA union’s cooperation around their own causes or actions. Frequently, these are not traditional labor issues, such as when UFGAU in 2005 contacted its members, held demonstrations, and advocated for the repeal of a $50 fee charged to international students. Nonetheless, these external issues and causes do enable GA unions to be active, thereby engaging in organizing unionism. Social movement or social justice unionism is a way to manufacture political opportunity.

In another example, graduate laborers in the University of California (UC) system, who are affiliated with the United Auto Workers (UAW), joined in sympathy strikes with campus service workers who belong to another union—the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) in 2014.26 The strikes demonstrated solidarity across the university’s labor force, including students, and it also showed the common cause between graduate labor and service workers—two groups that often must supplement their low pay with food stamps and students loans, thanks to the neoliberal policies governing the academy.27 But it also was a tactical maneuver on the part of the graduate union whose own contract negotiations have been locked in stalemate since June 2014.28 Typically, graduate workers in the UC system are forbidden by law from striking, but when they linked their efforts with the striking service workers they amplified both groups’ efforts.

In a third example of social movement unionism by GAs, organizers for the Graduate Employee Organization (GEO) at the University of Michigan mobilized opposition to a 2004 voter referendum to constitutionally ban same-
sex marriages in the state. Although the referendum was approved and the ban
enacted, the graduate union was visibly active and able to expand their range of
issues. Social justice struggles like these can lead organized labor to effectively ally
with more constituencies—and get organized. In fact, research has shown that
when unions prioritize racial equality and women’s issues, they are more successful
at organizing women and people of color.²⁹

The embrace of social movement unionizing certainly requires ideological
conviction, but it is also driven by self-interest. Without this approach, it would
be difficult to overcome the high turnover that is an unavoidable aspect of gradu-
ate labor. By expanding the range of issues addressed by the union, graduate labor
organizers create reasons for members to stay active. Additionally, by organizing
around more issues, they enlarge the appeal of the union. In other words, social
movement unionism and organizing unionism mutually reinforce each other.
Indeed, it remains to be seen if either could thrive without the other.

Operating unions in ways that link them to broader social activism isn’t a
new strategy, but it hasn’t always been an accepted one. In the 1960s, social
activism was at the center of disputes between traditional union members, the
so-called “hard hats,” and the new union members at Berkeley, Madison, and
elsewhere, known as the “radicals,” who embraced the social justice causes of the
Civil Rights Act and Vietnam War era. At that time, industrial workers largely
distrusted the graduate unions.³⁰ But these days, as the Great Recession has led to
rising numbers of temporary workers³¹ and economic restructuring,³² more jobs in
the U.S. more closely resemble graduate employment. These employment trends
have not escaped the notice of national labor groups, who have responded with
new approaches that adopt the graduate union model. As a result, graduate labor
organizers have moved to the center of union activity and are wielding newfound
influence.

Take a look at the most visible and militant union efforts of this decade, and
you will find high levels of graduate union involvement and influence. From the
powerful protests in Madison, Wisc., in 2011, to the massive Occupy Wall Street
movement that began that same year, it is clear that GA unions have moved into
the forefront of the American labor movement.

At the same time, the largest unions are adopting GA strategies. For exam-
ple, Richard Trumka, president of the American Federation of Labor and the
Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), the largest labor organization

Social movement unionism and organizing unionism
mutually reinforce each other. Indeed, it remains to
be seen if one could thrive without the other.
in the U.S., pledged in 2013 to work with non-union allies to bolster union influence and combat harmful trends around college debt and immigration policies. In another example, the NEA has partnered with Generation Progress on NEA’s Degrees Not Debt campaign to limit student debt and make college more affordable. These are part of national efforts that also involve other large unions such as AFSCME and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) to reach out to non-union organizations and build a new type of workplace representation through sustained collective action.

At the AFL-CIO’s “Let’s Talk” meetings, representatives from union

As the big unions reorient themselves to movement unionism, GA activists have been at the center of the most visible examples of union struggles.

and non-union organizations came together to come up with ideas for expanding labor’s influence. One of the suggestions, presented at the AFL-CIO’s national convention in 2013, was to disconnect union membership from specific workplaces and allow people to join directly. Trumka addressed this in his remarks to the 2013 Conference on New Models for Worker Representation.

We are building other new forms of membership through partnership agreements with the National Day Laborers Organizing Network and the National Domestic Workers Alliance. In 2006, here in Chicago, the AFL-CIO adopted a new policy extending affiliation to worker centers across the country... Many of our unions were created over 100 years ago when the economic and demographic landscape was very different. We can’t just defend our historic industrial and geographic bases when global forces far outside our power to control are eroding, if not destroying, those bases. Unions and our progressive allies need to collectively redirect our energy to focus on where jobs will be in the future and which workers can successfully organize and gain representation in the new global economy.

These comments and initiatives signal a departure from traditional models in favor of an organizing approach that strives for broad participation through the embrace of non-union struggles.

This new form of representation is being crafted to fit the realities of contemporary workplaces, where workers often are part-time employees or contracted to jobs—but not necessarily to places of employment. It also reflects the GA model, which reached beyond traditional bases long ago, probably because colleges and universities experienced early on the effects of neoliberal policies. Regardless, as the big unions reorient themselves to movement unionism, GA activists have been at the center of the most visible examples of union struggles.

In 2011, when Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker unleashed his attacks on working people and their right to collectively bargain, the Teaching Assistants Association...
(TAA) from the University of Wisconsin-Madison was instrumental in orchestrating the two-week occupation of the Wisconsin State Capitol. The prolonged demonstrations involved nearly 30,000 workers—from elementary teachers to firefighters—including large numbers of students. The TAA arranged for food, blankets, and other supplies so that protestors could set up camp, and they used their communications capacity to quickly mobilize attendees for legislative hearings. State Rep. Mark Pocan observed that the TAA “brought people in volume, I don’t know if anyone else brought them in as continually and consistently.” The result was a spectacle of diverse workers standing together in a way that placed

TAA Co-President Alex Hanna suggested the larger unions move to “reform our unions in such a way that they are oriented toward organizing...”

union issues at the center of public debate and news coverage.

Predictably, legislative efforts aimed at silencing workers and damaging unions, especially public sector unions, ensued in state houses across the Midwest. In Michigan, Gov. Rick Snyder signed a bill limiting the expansion of GA unions in public universities. The law denies collective bargaining rights to the state universities’ graduate student research assistants (GSRAs) on the basis of their work being tied to their status as students. Currently, only graduate student teaching assistants (GSTAs) are unionized in Michigan’s universities. A district court ruling in February 2014 deemed parts of the law to be unconstitutional. The ruling will be appealed and it does not settle any of the larger fights over GA union rights, but it does indicate that those seeking to curtail organized labor are aware of graduate unions. It is not farfetched to assume that this attention may be part of attempts to curtail their influence.

In the wake of the Madison protests, the larger unions returned to familiar tactics and focused on recalling Wisconsin lawmakers who supported Walker’s measures and also lobbying against similar legislation in other states. But TAA Co-President Alex Hanna suggested they move instead to “reform our unions in such a way that they are oriented toward a culture of organizing and of collective power.” In the months after the Madison protests, it’s possible they heeded Hanna’s call.

In 2011, the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement emerged from widespread opposition to increasing social and economic inequalities in the U.S., as well as the nation’s military interventionism and environmental ruin. These are all serious social justice issues—although not traditional union issues—and yet established labor groups such as the Transport Workers Union of America, SEIU, CWA, AFSCME and UNITE HERE provided resources and assistance. Just as the TAA helped sustain the Madison occupation, the Communications Workers supplied mattresses, walkie-talkies and other materials to New York City occupi-
ers to effectively maintain their demonstrations.

In perhaps the grandest gesture of support, in November 2011 the AFL-CIO, SEIU, and the Laborers’ International Union of North America joined a “We are the 99 percent” demonstration. Trumka’s words formally endorsing the OWS movement echoed the basic goals of social movement unionism.

We are proud that today on Wall Street, bus drivers, painters, nurses and utility workers will join students and homeowners, the unemployed and the underemployed to call for fundamental change... [Organized labor] will open our union halls and community centers as well as our arms and our hearts to those with the courage to stand up and demand a better America.

This support for OWS, a movement known for not articulating specific demands, might be the surest sign of big labor’s new orientation towards popular organizing. And it’s one with practical benefits, helping labor to garner support for its own more traditional causes and bridge the gulf between unions and other advocates for social justice. Just as unions sent people and supplies to assist the Occupiers, the OWS activists lent their support to unions. For example, when managers at Sotheby’s auction house were cutting employees' hours and pensions while increasing their own pay, Occupiers disrupted their auctions.

These and other examples of cooperation between the OWS movement and organized labor are not unique: they greatly resemble the relationships that GA unions regularly form with other student activist groups. Through their actions, and especially their organizing model, GA unions have shown the way to reinvigorate the American labor movement during these difficult times.

WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE US?

The newfound influence of the more radical, movement-oriented elements of organized labor offers those of us who seek to revitalize American unions a chance to heed Alex Hanna’s call to prioritize organizing and collective action over discreet, measurable gains in wages and benefits. This requires participation on the part of members and supporters. It may also require internal insurgent campaigns akin to what the Academic Workers for a Democratic Union did in California. In that case, members of the Academic Workers for a Democratic Union (ADWU), a reform caucus within the UC graduate union, have promoted vigorous action against UC’s labor practices and drawn the support of the California Nurses Alliance and UC Santa Cruz’s Skilled Crafts Unit, who all participated in a sympathy strike alongside the graduate employees and service workers in November 2013.

The California example offers hope that reform can take place within existing service-oriented unions, whose scope of action and concern has been narrowly focused on specific workplaces or types of workers (e.g. college faculty within a state). Another reason for optimism is the acknowledgment by some of the most entrenched labor leaders, such as Trumka, that unions must adapt to survive in the age of neoliberalism.
Restructuring access to union membership so that it is not necessarily linked to specific workplaces is a good start, but it’s just a start. To truly transform unions for the 21st century, our work also must entail re-conceptualizing organizing, so that unions reach beyond the workplace and beyond their own members, and prioritize social justice concerns. We must all recognize organizing as an end rather than a means to secure greater benefits.

In the immediate future, readers of this article who are members of service unions, which most faculty unions are, should begin the process of reorienting their local chapters by following the lead of graduate unions and pushing for collaboration with other workers’ and advocacy groups. Adopt social justice issues as union concerns. Again, this will likely require local, insurgent campaigns, but any efforts to expand unions’ scope of representation and agenda items will set a foundation for organizing and movement unionism. Make it a point to encourage unionization among your GA colleagues, and understand that your collaboration with them can lend credibility to their efforts.

Further down the road, consider the opportunities provided by the 2016 state and presidential elections and how the anticipated massive voter-turnout operation can be utilized for grassroots organizing among non-union members. One of the hallmarks of the GA-style organizing model is that events such as elections or contract negotiations aren’t just about electing new lawmakers or getting new contracts—they are understood as ancillary activities that enable the union to organize more effectively. In other words, you don’t organize to take action on Election Day, and then return to daily life; you see these opportunities as beginnings. After Election Day, regardless of who wins, union members and working class allies should immediately identify key issues of concern and accelerate their collective action.

Above all, move forward with this in mind: If there is to be a resurgence of organized labor in the United States, perhaps the once mocked graduate students offer the best path forward.

ENDNOTES
1. See Burawoy, “Introduction: A Public Sociology for Human Rights.”
5. The University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Teaching Assistants Association was the first to be recognized as an independent union in 1969. In the 1990s, the many GA unions to be recognized include the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (1991), the University of Kansas (1995), the University of Massachusetts, Lowell and the University of Iowa (1996). In 1999, the University of California system was the second to unionize GAs, after the State University

6. The first wave of marketization was state capitalism, propagated by colonial powers that appropriated wealth through force and coercion. During that time, labor rights were pursued and protected by local communities, and preserved in custom. The second wave was defined by nation states using their powers to protect private companies. Labor activism was institutionalized and preserved by law. The current third wave is the era of globalization, and it is dominated by multinational corporations rather than states. See Slaughter and Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy*.

7. In 1987, public colleges and universities received 3.3 times as much in revenue from state and local governments as they did from students. Now revenues from students and from states and localities are almost equal, according to the Oliff, et al, of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. See also Giroux, “Neoliberalism, Corporate Culture, and the Promise of Higher Education: The University as a Democratic Public Sphere;” Giroux, *The Terror of Neoliberalism: Authoritarianism and the Eclipse of Democracy*; Rhoads and Rhoades; and Slaughter and Rhoades.

8. Lustig, “The University Besieged.”


10. The average stipend of a graduate assistant in the physical sciences was $18,018 in 2012-2013, while those in the arts were paid $10,694 and those in library sciences earned $10,074. For more, see “The Salary Issue.”

11. See Bousquet, also Rhoads and Rhoades.

12. Rhoads and Rhoades, *op cit.*


15. Rhoads and Rhoades, *op cit.*


17. Fiorito, “Union Renewal and the Organizing Model in the United Kingdom.”


19. Gabe Kirchner, “Guiding Principles in Graduate Student Unionism.”

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Waterman, “Social Movement Unionism: A New Model for a New World Order?”


25. Nedda is a pseudonym.


29. Clawson and Clawson, “What has happened to the US Labor Movement?”


32. Robinson, “Neoliberal Restructuring and US Unions: Toward a Social Movement Unionism?”

34. NEA’s Degrees Not Debt campaign has involved a coalition of partners, including Generation Progress, the Center for American Progress, as well as numerous NEA-Student chapters. Visit nea.org/degreesnotdebt to sign NEA’s Degrees Not Debt pledge.


36. Trumka, op cit.


38. Ibid.

39. Oltean, “Michigan Senate Passes Legislation Against Graduate Student Union.”


41. Hanna issued this call in a personal blog post, “Coming Out.”


43. Trumka, “Statement by AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka On Occupy Wall Street.”

44. Newhouse, “A Labor Breakthrough: Occupy Wall Street’s Union Connections and the Role of Solidarity in Staying Power.”

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My Children’s Literature students arrive on the first day of class to find seats arranged in clusters. There is no syllabus to pick up but there are colored 3” x 5” cards with names printed on them, folded tent-style, and arrayed on a table. I direct each student to find his or her own card and form groups to be comprised of one student whose name is on a yellow card, two on green, and one pink. They don’t realize it, but the color-coding ensures that each group is a heterogeneous mix of first-years through seniors.

Once seated, each group finds a copy of Goodnight Moon by Margaret Wise Brown, and a handout to structure their activity for the next 30 to 40 minutes. I walk around, welcome each student, and then leave the classroom for a few minutes. Many don’t even notice I’ve left, because they’re getting immersed in the work; if they do notice, I hope it crosses their minds that their learning is proceeding very well without me.

When I return, I make the rounds, pausing briefly when I encounter a group that appears thoroughly engaged and well-focused, and offering more intensive support where needed. At least one group has inevitably finished the entire list of guiding questions, way too fast, while one or two others haven’t advanced far at all. Brief dialogue often reveals that some of these students are reluctant to contribute.

Dale Borman Fink holds a an A.B. from Harvard, a Master’s in early childhood education from Antioch University, and a Ph.D. in special education from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Fink is associate professor at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, where he teaches courses in early childhood education, special education, and children’s literature. Among his books are Making a Place for Kids with Disabilities (2000) and a children’s book, Mr. Silver and Mrs. Gold (1980).
because they’re worried that their ideas will seem puny, even embarrassing, when 
the professor eventually delivers the “correct” interpretations. I choose portions 
of the text or illustrations and coax them to simply articulate what they see. You 
noticed that Brown uses rhymes (moon, balloon) but also words that don’t quite 
rhyme (room)? That Clement Hurd’s bold color illustrations alternate with black 
and white pages? Great! You are bringing exactly the kind of aesthetic sensibility 
and attention to detail you will need throughout this course.

Before their instructor has provided a syllabus or spoken his first words to 
the class as a whole, the students have immersed themselves in course content,

My ambition is not only to get students to think 
about the subject matter I am presenting, but to get 
them wondering about the role of learner and teacher.

exercised their aesthetic and intellectual chops, and begun to form bonds with 
their peers. When we take up the guiding questions as a full class, students do 
most of the talking. Some students contribute ideas I fed them during my float-
ing consultations, but articulate them in their own words—and that works for 
them and for me. I have relied on my knowledge and scholarship to prepare 
the ground for the entire exercise. There is no need for me to dominate the 
conversation.

TEACHING COLLEGE LIKE AN EARLY 
CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR

One of the strategies favored by teachers of the Reggio Emilia preschools in 
Italy is called provocation. These municipally operated infant-toddler and early 
childhood centers, developed in northern Italy in the wake of World War II, have 
inspired early childhood educators worldwide since the 1980s. When Reggio (or 
Reggio–influenced) teachers arrange for young children to encounter novel mate-
rials, familiar materials displayed in a novel manner, or an unexpected change in 
their environment, they call these provocations. They hope their young learners 
will respond to the encounter with curiosity, excitement, questions—and most of 
all, by having to think.

I love using provocations as part of my pedagogy in higher education. My 
ambition is not only to get students to think about the subject matter I am pre-
senting, but to get them wondering (though maybe not always consciously) about 
the role of learner and teacher.

Most students arrive at the first meeting of a new course with the expectation 
that they can be passive. They haven’t been assigned any reading yet, so how could 
they be expected to participate actively? Experience has taught many of them that
the first class will be “organizational,” rather than content-focused. If they are anticipating having to think at all, it is to ponder such questions as, “How many papers will I have to write?” or “Is there anybody I know taking this class, someone I can sit with?”

I surprise my students: I require them to participate actively. I disrupt their plans to sit with a roommate or friend. The professor is in the background while texts, websites, or other content are in the foreground. The first dialogue of the semester is peer-to-peer, not professor-to-student. All of these, I hope, add up to provocation—moving students from sedentary to high-alert.

The provocation can also take place before the first face-to-face meeting, or in a class that is purely online. My website for an introductory class in special education features a large photograph of Aaron Fotheringham upside down in a wheelchair. Aaron was the first American to execute a wheelchair backflip off a skating ramp. This image acts as an immediate provocation. What does it mean to “have a disability” if a “person with disabilities” is engaging in such a daring, exhilarating performance? Without the benefit of an instructor nearby, the image provokes the student to pose important questions.

I began working with preschool-aged children long before I thought about becoming a professor, and nearly every element of my approach to teaching in higher education was rooted then. The provocation can also take place before the first face-to-face meeting, or in a class that is purely online. My website for an introductory class in special education features a large photograph of Aaron Fotheringham upside down in a wheelchair. Aaron was the first American to execute a wheelchair backflip off a skating ramp. This image acts as an immediate provocation. What does it mean to “have a disability” if a “person with disabilities” is engaging in such a daring, exhilarating performance? Without the benefit of an instructor nearby, the image provokes the student to pose important questions.

I began working with preschool-aged children long before I thought about becoming a professor, and nearly every element of my approach to teaching in higher education was rooted then. In addition to provocations, I seek to activate the “whole student,” promote peer supports, and incorporate informal and authentic forms of assessment. In the upcoming pages, I elaborate on each of these, after first explaining the origin of my commitment to transform the college classroom into something more like an early childhood setting.

**UNSATISFYING ENCOUNTERS WITH “LEARNING” IN THE IVY-COVERED HALLS**

During my senior year as an undergraduate at Harvard, I began working at the KLH Child Development Center, which opened in the late 1960s as one of the first employer-sponsored childcare centers in the country. It was one subway stop from Harvard Square, and drew its primary constituency from parents who worked at local factories. Alternating my time between young children and college students gave me an unusual opportunity to observe and contrast vastly different approaches to education.
In my college courses, the professors “taught” and the students took notes. In lecture classes, which were the majority, faculty never knew my name, or whether I was even there. A few stylized their discourse by toking on pipes or cigarettes, and one chemist used to bound energetically up the steps of the lecture hall to interact with anyone who raised his hand. But most professors remained behind their podiums, did not encourage questions, did not use audio-visuals, nor encourage any kind of work with peers. In four years, I never experienced a student-led presentation or a student-made poster. Professors evaluated our learning by two methods: exams and papers.

Meanwhile, at the day care center, things were very different. There was no waiting around for an instructor to signal that learning was about to begin.

The tutorials and seminars were small, enabling those instructors to get to know students. But even there, faculty relentlessly focused on printed texts: reading them, discussing them, and writing about them. “Learning,” when I was not sitting in a classroom scribbling notes as keenly as possible, consisted of spending long hours laboring alone in a library or a dorm room, struggling against the fear of falling hopelessly behind

I was excited when an English professor of history included the Beatles album, “Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band,” on our reading list. Peter Stansky’s lecture on that text must have been compelling, because I can still recall the gist of it: The “one and only Billy Shears” alluded to the traditional English music hall, which symbolized the glory days of the British Empire. The Empire was in decline, as illustrated by the plaintive lyrics of “She’s Leaving Home,” the minimalist aspirations of “When I’m 64,” and the rudderlessness of the political class, as shown in “A Day in the Life” (“He blew his mind out in a car/He didn’t notice that the lights had changed”).

What I recall as keenly as the brilliance of the lecture was the fact that it was nothing but a lecture. There was no opportunity for students to develop, explain, or defend our own interpretations of the lyrics, or even comment on Stansky’s ideas. Moreover, the experience did not include listening to any of the audio tracks.

Meanwhile, at the day care center, things were very different. Singing and listening to music of many varieties were routine. There was no waiting around for an instructor to step forward and signal that the learning was about to begin. Teachers prepared the environment and set out materials but they were not the focal points of the classroom. Once children hung up their coats, they began
interacting with peers and choosing activities, turning to teachers for support as they deemed necessary.

Learning and teaching were not solitary but collaborative. All the teachers worked in teams, and they communicated with each other daily as together they guided young children to assimilate and master language, social skills, literacy, science and math concepts. Helping each child to cultivate a strong, positive sense of personal efficacy was treated as of equal importance to the mastering of specific skills.

A few years later, I obtained a master’s degree in early childhood education, and came to realize that the approach to learning I witnessed at KLH was not unique. The ideas they put into action were consistent with a multi-generational tradition of American “nursery education,” and supported by theorists like Dewey, Piaget, and Montessori. According to this tradition and these theorists, students do not assimilate or absorb knowledge by having it handed over or explained by someone who knows more but rather, they construct knowledge. They do this through hands-on engagement, using all their senses, and having opportunities to fail over and over before arriving at a “correct” understanding.

During that first year at KLH, I did not yet have that background in early childhood education. Yet over time, I began to believe that the teaching and learning I witnessed at the childcare center had a deeper, richer, and more authentic quality than what I was experiencing at Harvard. I found myself perplexed. Why did professors restrict themselves to such a limited repertoire of instructional approaches? I could see that some concepts might best be explicated in a lecture, but why such a disproportionate reliance on that single mode of instruction? Did the phrase, “higher education” mean to separate and elevate knowledge acquired through “higher” (i.e., intellectual) powers, while denigrating forms of knowledge more tethered to one’s body, senses, social relationships, cultural context, or emotional development?

Decades passed. I became a faculty member in higher education, and I knew I wanted to bring to my students better opportunities to think and learn than were given to me as an undergraduate. I aimed to reach and engage their emotions, their social interactions, their senses, even their need to physically get out of their seats and move. I wanted them to be as eager in their learning as the children I got to know at KLH.

Students do not assimilate or absorb knowledge by having it handed over or explained by someone who knows more. Rather, they construct knowledge.
The photograph (left) is from a series titled *Surface Tensions*. The artist is Meggan Gould, assistant professor, at the University of New Mexico. For more, visit [www.meggangould.net](http://www.meggangould.net).
PROVOCATION IN THE HALLS OF ACADEME: BRINGING PIAGET AND VYGOTSKY INTO THE UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM

June 11, 2007

because
TEACHING THE “WHOLE STUDENT”

In early childhood education, we call it “teaching the whole child.” Why approach learners at other stages of life differently? My pedagogy intersperses music, drawing, hands-on activities, physical movement, and structured social interaction along with more commonly used formats such as printed text and multimedia.

As I prepare for each class, I envision how much time students will spend accessing various channels for learning. I find there is seldom any reason that “listening to prepared remarks” should take up more than 20 percent of a class, while lecturing plus whole-group discussion need not exceed 50 percent. I constantly ask myself: How can students discover, uncover, or construct knowledge about today’s topic, rather than hearing about it from me?

How can a study of statistical tables—for example, the ones that annually describe special education trends by state, school district, and so forth—become a “whole student” activity? I find I can make the activity personal, independent, interactive, and engaging simply by letting each student choose one state or city and providing them with a list of questions. These web-savvy learners enjoy ferreting out the data—especially if they’ve chosen places they care about. It comes naturally to the ones who finish first to support their peers. When we have a display of data that they have dug up and care about, I use this “numerical portrait” to help them uncover some key underlying ideas and issues: the fluid definitions of learning disabilities, the rapid increase in students with autism, the wide disparities between states.

PEER SUPPORTS

The legacy of Soviet theorist Lev Vygotsky to early childhood educators around the world was to recognize that every learner has a “zone of proximal development,” and that support targeted to that zone—just beyond what the learner is able to achieve independently—will assist the learner in advancing to the next stage more quickly than otherwise. When work with partners or small groups is orchestrated thoughtfully, peer models can play as powerful a role in a university classroom as their younger brothers and sisters do in a sandbox.

In all my classes, I create partnerships and small groups whose longevity ranges from a few minutes to several weeks of collaboration. There is no blueprint that guarantees the correct composition of a group, but I learned from my early
childhood background (Vygotsky again) that social context is a critical input to any learning process. By taking responsibility for the way groups are formed, I can more effectively advance the learning agenda. Also, I can subtly encourage connections that cross generation, gender, ethnicity, and cultural backgrounds. Toward the latter part of the semester, I do permit students to select their own partners for certain kinds of projects. But by then, everyone has worked with a variety of classmates.

One cannot simply place learners at any level into groups and expect that good outcomes will naturally emerge. On the contrary: many students have told me they have terrible recollections of small-group work in high school and in other college classes, mostly stemming from situations where more committed students “did all the work.” Assigning roles within groups, defining those roles clearly, requiring students to keep me posted about their progress, and having students submit individual written reports in the aftermath of group presentations help me ensure that my students get the benefits of peer support while avoiding the pitfalls.

When asking students to post and interact with their peers online, I similarly create roles and structure. For example, I will designate one or more specific students to be the first to comment on a reading. Everyone will eventually have that responsibility. The first student has an earlier deadline than the others and a different, more extensive rubric to follow, because the first post will build a framework for further class discussion.

INFORMAL AND AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT

Educators of the youngest learners do not quiz for “right answers.” Rather, they engage in dialogue and support their ability to discern and learn. In science, for example, they help them to explore phenomena, look for patterns, make observations, generate and test hypotheses, make predictions, document their findings, and share their insights with peers.3 As a faculty member in higher education, I do not have as much freedom to let the learners set the agenda and the pace. But I experiment every semester in hopes of moving the balance away from having my students “jump through hoops” and toward spending their time in ways that are meaningful to them.

One of my experiments has been to create assignments that are graded only as “completed” or “not completed” and that require students to engage in dialogue

One cannot simply place learners into groups and expect good outcomes. On the contrary: many students have terrible recollections of small-group work.
with me. For example, I have asked my education students to write about their least favorite curriculum area. “What are your memories of this subject? Can you think of a way to teach it—perhaps differently than it was taught to you—that would be engaging for students and that you would enjoy?” Knowing that I will write back to them with my own thoughts, but without any evaluative comments, students understand that I am actually interested in their honest reflections. Often, it requires a few assignments of this nature before students stop trying to impress me, and begin trying to impress themselves.

Some faculty peg part of a course grade to “class participation.” I tried this, until I realized that I could not find a fair way to measure it. I decided that I should give college students the same respect I had always given younger learners—to recognize that they acquire knowledge through myriad different learning styles. Why reward or penalize a student for the learning and communication style that comes naturally to her or him? When it comes to whole-class discussion, I work on spreading the participation around, signalling to some to “hold onto your thoughts,” while asking to hear from “voices we have not yet heard.” And I frequently call on students unsolicited. Of equal importance: most of the questions I ask in class are open-ended. One of my early childhood mentors, Lilian Katz, used to say that you are insulting young children if you ask them questions to which you already know the answer, because, “That is not a dialogue; that is a test.”

A related question I have asked myself is how to make papers meaningful and authentic to the specific content area—not a repeated measure of whether someone is a capable and competent writer. My best strategy has been to ask students to stop writing papers for me and write them for a different (imagined) audience, perhaps a letter to a disgruntled parent. “Why is my daughter playing with marbles and ramps when I come to pick her up?” the parent wants to know. “Is the teacher too tired at the end of the day to work with her on her letters and numbers?” They have to reference concepts we are studying, but contextualize them in concise and jargon-free communication.

DO WE PASS ALONG WHAT IS KNOWN OR SUPPORT STUDENTS IN GOING BEYOND?

Jean Piaget, the Swiss biologist who became one of the 20th century’s leading child development theorists, divided education into two types—passive and active.
To choose, he explained, we must clarify our goal. “Must we shape children and individuals who are simply capable of learning what is already known? To repeat what has been acquired by the preceding generations? Or is it about shaping innovative, creative minds?”

I had read *Where the Wild Things Are* a couple hundred times, browsed through some secondary commentaries, and shepherded many classes through the iconic work before “Rebecca” joined my course. I had cancelled the first class of the fall due to a conflict, but in lieu of the opening class, I had given them an assignment: to study Maurice Sendak’s most famous book and write a short paper or make a video on any element of the book that drew their attention. And there it was, from a soft-spoken sophomore with dark, curly hair who had not yet had the benefit of attending a single one of my classes: an unmistakably brilliant insight, right there in her video, which she had shot using her laptop or phone in her dorm room. She said that most kids around the age of the protagonist, Max, are into dogs or cats, or maybe even more exotic animals like elephants. But the text and artwork revealed that Max was wearing a “wolf suit.” A wolf, Rebecca commented, is popularly known as a solitary animal, as in the phrase, “lone wolf,” thereby fore-shadowing Max’s solitary journey.

I had thought about the wolf suit as representing a boy who wanted to feel strong and aggressive, but I had never thought about it as insightfully as Rebecca had. I showed her video to the class and acknowledged that this student had found meaning where I had overlooked it. I did not want them coming to this class to sit there and absorb my knowledge and erudition. I was inviting them to bring their critical faculties and to find their own unique ways to surpass me.

Young learners like the ones I worked with at KLH do not need a great deal of prodding or encouragement to explore materials, express themselves artistically, or articulate opinions. They assume—until socialized otherwise—that they are entitled to their own ideas and even to their own learning agendas. With university students, it is not so simple. We encounter them after a long process of socialization. Most arrive in our classrooms with a set of assumptions forged through years of experience, assumptions about schooling, assignments and classrooms, and that are incompatible with the meaningful and unbridled quest for learning. Would you like to see some of those assumptions begin to unravel? Why not plan a provocation?

*Most students arrive in our classrooms with a set of assumptions about schooling and assignments and classrooms, forged through years of experience.*
ENDNOTES

1. Edwards et al., *100 Languages of Children*.
4. Spoken during a class I took with Dr. Katz at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1995.
5. Films Media Group, “Piaget’s Developmental Theory: An Overview.” From the opening segment of the film. The English translations are my own, not those given in the subtitles.

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Brownbackistan

by Gregg Primo Ventello

Every state in the U.S. has language in its constitution guaranteeing to its citizens a free public education, yet many states are failing to meet this fundamental right. From New York to California, lawsuits have been brought against state governors and legislatures who have not funded schools adequately. The field of false prophets grows and sermons on “reform” and on improving “teacher quality” only veil the very real problem of poverty as the source of students’ educational failures. Swindlers blame teachers and unions, even going so far as to claim that the schools are full of “excess and greed.” The founding American tenet that a healthy democracy requires a free public education is being challenged, and Kansas may well be the frontline, with the New York Times calling the state “the epicenter of a new battle over states’ obligation to adequately fund public education.”

Last October, a New York Times editorial titled “Shortchanging Kansas Schoolchildren” criticized Governor Sam Brownback and the Kansas State Legislature. The Times editorial board wrote in support of a state court decision to increase education funding in Kansas, and they distrusted the decision made by Kansas lawmakers, after the state reported a boost in revenue, to create “huge tax cuts” instead of restore school funding. Kansas education spending “has fallen an estimated 16.5 percent since 2008, including $500 million in cuts under the Brownback administration.”

Gregg Primo Ventello is a professor of English at Kansas City Kansas Community College. He is a 2014-2015 Fulbright Lecturer in Japan. His narrative essay “Das Schweinehund” was recognized as a “Notable Essay” in The Best American Essays 2013, and his most recent fiction appeared in the Spring 2014 issue of Consequence magazine.
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In response to this criticism, Brownback sent a letter to the *New York Times* in which he wrote, “Kansas has great schools.” I was surprised to read it. I teach in Kansas and, while it is true Kansas has strong schools, this is not the message that has been conveyed in word or action by Governor Brownback, by his administration, or by the supermajority in the Kansas State Legislature. Instead, like officials in many states, Brownback has taken the position that public education is wasteful and inefficient.

It’s difficult not to conclude that the objectives of Brownback and his cronies have been to obstruct and suppress dissenting views.

**WHEN IN DOUBT, CREATE A TASK FORCE**

In September of 2012, Brownback established his School Efficiency Task Force. “Inefficient spending impacts Kansas taxpayers,” he told the press. The problem was that the task force had 10 initial appointees, none of whom worked in education. Criticism forced Brownback to appoint an 11th member, a young superintendent from Iola, who Brownback described as “open to new ideas.” Still, the task force was curiously dominated by accountants whose most innovative idea was to launch a website where anyone could anonymously report perceived inefficiencies. The task force was the precursor to the recently established K-12 Student Performance and Efficiency Commission. Any hope that this new commission might include people with expertise and open minds was quashed with the first two appointees. Kansas House Speaker Ray Merrick selected the president and CEO of the Kansas Chamber of Commerce, along with the president of the Kansas Policy Institute, a conservative think tank. Neither man has any professional experience in K-12 education, nor has either been shy to share his preconceived agenda. From the outset, Governor Brownback has shown little interest in the expertise of professional educators or in viewpoints contrary to his own.

Not only has the governor ignored expertise, but the Kansas Legislature is working to silence it. Bills have been proposed to restrict teachers’ collective bargaining rights and to prohibit teachers from using an automatic payroll deduction for paying association dues. With bills like these, along with bills that exempt lawmakers from the Kansas Open Meetings Act, it’s difficult not to conclude that the objectives of Brownback and his cronies have been to obstruct and suppress dissenting views, to garner as much control as possible, and to protect themselves from both public and judicial review.

Their most blatant attempt to circumvent the courts has been during the
on-going fight for school funding. In 2005 and 2006, the Kansas Supreme Court ruled that the school finance system was unconstitutional and ordered the legislature to increase funding. The court’s ruling has not only remained unfulfilled, but as the *New York Times* pointed out, Brownback has reduced funding and slashed taxes.

Legislators found the judiciary even more meddlesome in January 2013 when it ruled on a second lawsuit filed in 2010 by a coalition of school districts. A three-judge panel determined that the Kansas Legislature violated its constitutional duty to provide suitable funding for public schools. In their 326-page opinion they wrote, “It seems completely illogical that the state can argue that a reduction in education funding was necessitated by the downturn in the economy and the state’s diminishing resources and at the same time cut taxes further, thereby reducing the sources of revenue on the basis of a hope that doing so will create a boost to the state’s economy at some point in the future.”

In response, the legislature changed the way appellate judges were appointed. They blocked Kansas Bar Association participation by eliminating the nine-member nominating commission who screened potential applicants before forwarding to the governor three finalists from which to choose. Now, Brownback and the legislature have sole authority to appoint judges at the appellate level. In addition, they plan to amend the Kansas Constitution. First, they hope to abolish judiciary oversight on school finance, guaranteeing that the legislature is the final word. And second, they want the governor and the senate to have exclusive power to appoint Supreme Court justices. Of course, they also appealed the 2013 decision by the three-judge panel, and in anticipation of that ruling by the Kansas Supreme Court, the behavior of some legislators was almost comical.

One lawmaker, Jerry Lunn, told state university officials to prepare for cuts to higher education. He warned if the Supreme Court orders an increase in funding for public schools, that the additional monies would be squeezed out of an already parched university system. Lunn told Kansas University Chancellor Bernadette Gray-Little, “You really do have a horse in this race” and suggested that she “talk to [her] friendly Supreme Court justices.” In other words, a Kansas state official encouraged the chancellor to commit the crime of trying to influence the decision of a Supreme Court justice.
COURT RULES, LEGISLATORS RETALIATE

The long-awaited Supreme Court ruling came in March. While the justices did not rule on whether or not K-12 funding was adequate—remanding it back to the three-judge panel to consider further—they did rule that current funding was inequitable. They upheld the lower court’s decision that cuts made during the Great Recession were in violation of the Kansas Constitution because they inequitably affected low-income districts.

The legislature responded with House Bill 2506 increasing state funding to poorer districts by $129 million. Included in the bill, however, came a host of controversial policy changes without warning or public hearing. HB 2506 eliminates tenure for teachers, reduces services for at-risk students, allows people without teaching degrees to teach math and science, and offers a tax credit to any business offering a scholarship to a private school. Additionally, regardless of the $129 million, the new funding formula will result in the overall loss of funds for most Kansas school districts. Outrage at HB 2506 was best expressed to legislators at a forum where retired teacher Leota Coats stressed the importance of due process rights for teachers. She reminded them that in 1980 she’d been fired for refusing to change the failing grade of a high school football star. “A winning football team,” she said, “was more important than what was going on in my classroom.” Coats fought her firing to the Kansas Supreme Court and was reinstated.

House Bill 2506 might satisfy the judiciary on the issue of equity, but the question of adequacy is being deliberated by the three-judge panel for a second time. It’s difficult to believe that their decision won’t align with previous rulings ordering the state to increase K-12 funding by hundreds of millions of dollars. However, because of Brownback’s massive tax cuts, just where this money will come from is a mystery. State tax revenue for April, May, and June 2014 has plummeted a total of $338 million below expectations, causing Moody’s Investors Service to downgrade state bonds. Tax shortfalls and other indicators confirm that Brownback’s economic policy is highly risky. Even Brownback’s Council of Economic Advisors, for which he serves as chairman, issued a report showing that Kansas is behind six states in the region in population, GDP, personal income, private-industry wage level, and private business establishment. How did the governor respond to this news? His spokesperson said, “Kansas is closing the gap with states in our surrounding region.”
HAS BROWNBACK HEARD OF KANSAS PROGRESSIVISM?

Restructuring the tax system to benefit the rich, politicizing the appointment of judges, narrowing the bargaining rights and protections for teachers, and enabling legislators to work behind closed doors are just a few examples of how the Brownback administration and other state governments operate today. They start from the paternalistic view that “management” will always be fair and impartial, and they jettison the system of checks and balances to upset the balance of power in their favor. They carry on as if they have no historical perspec-

Has Sam Brownback never heard of Kansas Progressivism? His brand of “trickle down” economics is bankrupting the state.

tive or foresight. Do they believe that their successors will all be like-minded, that every future legislature and governor will be of the same political persuasion? Has Sam Brownback never heard of Kansas Progressivism? His brand of “trickle down” economics is bankrupting the state, yet his brand of shortsightedness still trickles down to some college administrators who do not understand or choose to ignore the academic culture in which they work, and whose actions are attempts to dismantle shared governance, to weaken the faculty association, and to turn the teaching profession into a service industry. But worst of all, in their zeal for “efficiency,” these types of administrators treat students like inventory.

Unlike government officials and school administrators in our state, Kansas teachers have both foresight and historical perspective. This is one reason Kansas schools are great, but also why we can’t help but notice the parallels between Governor Brownback and a bygone leader. During the Great Depression, Herbert Hoover could not free himself from the prevailing economic theory of the Efficiency Movement of that era. Sam Brownback is on a similar trajectory. Teachers know it, and Kansans are growing tired of being Brownback’s “real live experiment,” as he described it on MSNBC’s Morning Joe. Unfortunately, some Kansans have grown so tired that they’re leaving. A kind of exodus has started, an outward migration according to the Census Bureau. Not only has this been covered by the media, but it is also evident to me as I watch good people leave Kansas, friends and colleagues, core faculty leaving or looking for work elsewhere.

Those who remain will continue to fight. As I write this, Kansas National Education Association is preparing its legal challenge to House Bill 2506 and its repeal of tenure. The troops are rallying because we know that Brownback’s first priority is not Kansas, it’s his political career. We know that long after the current governor is gone, we’ll all still be here doing what we know to be the best prac-
ties. We’ll all still be teaching long after Brownback hits his inevitable political nadir. It won’t be long before “Brownbackistan” takes its place alongside “Hoovervilles” in the American lexicon. And, I look forward to teaching that.

ENDNOTES
1. Alex, “Christie calls for teachers’ union to forgo member dues.” During an appearance on CNBC’s Squawk Box, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie said, “I love the public schools, but the fact of the matter is there is excess and greed there.”
2. Sciarra and Henderson, “What’s the Matter With Kansas’ Schools?”
3. “Shortchanging Kansas Schoolchildren.”
4. “Brownback responds to NY Times.”
5. Rothschild, “Dems blast website seeking examples of school waste.”
9. Hancock, “Court: Kansas Legislature’s level of funding for schools unconstitutional.”
11. Lefler, “Teachers, supporters give Kansas Lawmakers an earful at legislative forum.”
12. “Kansas officials: June revenues miss mark by $28M.” Associated Press; Rothschild, “Moody’s Investors Service downgrades state bonds, citing Kansas’ sluggish economy, tax cuts.” Rothschild, “Economic report shows Kansas lagging in numerous categories of growth.” The Council of Economic Advisors report can be found at www.kansascommerce.com/DocumentCenter/View/4770. The six states Kansas was compared to include: Arkansas, Colorado, Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska, and Oklahoma. National coverage includes, among many others, Barro, “Yes, if You Cut Taxes, You Get Less Tax Revenue” and, Ingraham, “Tax cuts in Kansas have cost the state money – and job creation’s been terrible.”
13. Rothschild, “Experts say tax plan ‘experiment’ will be difficult to measure,” pp. 1A, 2A.
15. “Editorial: KU Loss,” and “KU professor and Lawrence school board member named dean of Utah architecture school.”
16. Hancock, “KNEA still planning lawsuit over repeal of teacher tenure,” and Hancock, “Davis calls for delay in further tax cuts.”

WORKS CITED


Spring Breaking

by Steve Wilson

Outside, the first cedar elm buds: green inclinations, growing.

Edging the windbreaks, a few scrubby tufts – of spring, advance guard.

A ladder-back hammers away at the neighbor’s bare sycamore. Mornings breach our defenses.

Wild epiphanies haunt the empty classrooms, the orderly rows, at week’s end.

Arcs in air, our intentions hurtle along the hallways.

Steve Wilson’s poems have appeared in journals and anthologies nationwide. His most recent collection is The Lost Seventh (2011). He teaches at Texas State University.
Lily Eskelsen García, a former teacher of the year from Utah, was elected president of the National Education Association in July 2014. This fall, she sat down with Thought & Action to share her thoughts on topics of higher education, ranging from the student debt crisis to the “alarming attacks on the public good that is a quality public university.”

THOUGHT & ACTION: Let’s start the conversation with student debt, a topic I know you care about a great deal. Forty million Americans owe more than $1.2 trillion in student debt. In a recent conversation that you had with U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.), the Senator characterized it as a national economic emergency.

ESKELSEN GARCÍA: When I graduated from the University of Utah, I believe my tuition was $168 per semester. I had a federal National Direct Student Loan, and I worked part-time, and I think that at the end of four years I might have owed $4,000 or $5,000. I felt that the state system existed to make an investment in me.

Today students at the University of Utah, a public university, are paying more than 40 times as much as I did — and it wasn’t that long ago!

Earlier this year, as part of NEA’s Degrees Not Debt campaign, I visited California State University, Northridge and I met a young man, Jesse Sanchez, president of Student California Teachers Association, who left a good-paying job to return to college and become a teacher. Now Jesse Sanchez owes $65,000 in student loans and he’s wondering if he made the right choice. What kind of country have we become when somebody like Jesse Sanchez thinks he made a mistake in going to college?
We need to return to the idea that it is a basic public good to have well-educated men and women in society. We need to make clear that state investments in public higher education, in a system that is accessible and affordable, is not just an investment in that individual but also an investment in the public good.

We have to demand that state lawmakers and governors reverse the 25-year trend to disinvest in public higher education. We must demand that Congress pass my fellow teacher Elizabeth Warren’s legislation that would allow borrowers to refinance their student loans at lower interest rates, just like homeowners can do with their mortgages. Why can’t young people do that? It doesn’t make sense. We also must demand that Congress expand loan repayment and forgiveness programs, and fully fund Pell Grants.

There’s so much we can do as activists. I want everybody reading this to go to nea.org/degreesnotdebt and start working with me to get degrees not debt for our students.

**THOUGHT & ACTION:** Unfortunately, public investment in higher education has decreased dramatically over the past decade, while those funds are increasingly linked to “accountability systems…”

**ESKELSEN GARCÍA:** When you hear the discussion today, you can see how the toxic corporate reform that K12 has experienced since No Child Left Behind was passed in 2001 has infiltrated higher ed. You can turn on the television and you can hear the President of the United States talk about how we need to measure the ‘bang for the buck’ that we’re getting from our state college or university. Hearing that makes me cringe! Whenever they talk about ‘bang for the buck’ it comes down
to something you can measure, which is usually a standardized test in K12. In
higher ed I’m afraid ‘bang for the buck’ means how much money a graduate earns.

If you are at a university that puts out a lot of teachers, social workers, coun-
selors, nurses, or other community-minded professionals, and by the way these are
usually women, well, those jobs don’t pay a lot of money. Would you say those jobs
are not a good ‘bang for your buck?’ Men who seem to have said that, and I say
men because whenever I see somebody with one of these ‘great’ ideas about reduct-
ing education to a number, I’m amazed at how often it’s men, think success looks
like money.

I’d like to see more men and women say that success looks like impact on the
life of a child or a family. Whenever somebody wants to boil it all down and put a
number or a dollar sign next to something that says education, we are missing the
point. We will destroy education in that way.

THOUGHT & ACTION: So this sounds like common ground for K12
and higher ed!

ESKELSEN GARCÍA: For a union like ours, a union of educators from pre-
school to graduate school, there really is common ground in the battle against the
corrupting influence of standardization and the corporatization of public education.

But I would say that our higher ed brothers and sisters are the vanguard. They
are the front-line soldiers in this work. As much as we’ve seen it in K12, it actually
started in higher ed. Our higher ed brothers and sisters have been saying, ‘Here is
your community college, here is your state university, and our mission is to serve
you, the public,’ and here is this other world of for-profit higher education where
the mission is about bigger and bigger dollars. But when you look at the money in
the edu-businesses of higher ed, you will see that it is almost entirely public dollars.
Those students, because tuition is sky high at edu-business institutions, are almost
entirely funded through federal student loans and grants.

Consider this: If you’re a for-profit college, and you have this program that is
identical to the one offered by your nearby community college except that it costs
10 times as much money, and you also have friends who are political friends and
you can convince them that they need to invest less in public institutions, what do
you think happens? Do you think public funds to public institutions are cut? Do
you think tuition goes up at those public institutions? It will have to go up or you’ll
have to dramatically cut programs. You have to do something that will seriously
and detrimentally affect students. And as prices go up, the people who benefit
directly are the edu-businesses.

THOUGHT & ACTION: Let’s talk about contingent faculty, and the
growing reliance of institutions on these underpaid, overworked educators.

ESKELSEN GARCÍA: Their pay and their job is security is so tenuous—
and that is by design. This is the factory corporate model: First you standardize
it, then you privatize it, and then you deprofessionalize it. What we’re seeing
happening to our contingent brothers and sisters is that deprofessionalization.
If you’re somebody who wants to corporatize higher ed, who really has no concern for quality, this system of contingent employment works perfectly for you. Whether it’s a tenured professor who has academic freedom and the ability to stay on campus and develop real relationships with students, or somebody we pay minimum wage who has to leave campus as soon as class ends, the corporate reformer think it’s all the same, right? They’re both warm bodies that can teach a class—except one is a lot cheaper! Wrong, wrong, wrong. It is not all the same to those educators, and it is especially not all the same to their students. It’s the students who will suffer.

I remember when I walked into the College of Education at the University of Utah, I had tenured faculty who had been there for their whole careers and also younger faculty members moving along the tenure track. People were like, ‘did you get Professor Buchanan! I loved him!’ These professors were like stars that we hyperventilated over because they were that good. Now it’s just a prayer.

THOUGHT & ACTION: No doubt you’ve heard that some NEA Higher Ed members feel on the edges of their union. How do you see that changing?

ESKELSEN GARCÍA: When I have worked with higher ed members on different membership committees and on other work here at NEA, they all say the same thing: They say we want NEA recognized as an advocate and a voice for higher education. We can’t just be talking about K12 issues.

The good news is that the bad news has propelled us to look at all of education and all educators as a public good, as a public trust. We’re all under attack, and whether that’s by naïve people or by sinister people, the results will be the same — students won’t get what they need. We need to stand by side to stop it.
SPECIAL FOCUS

The Business of Education
The thought on many an academic’s mind today is how to stop it. The “it”? The barrage of reports, papers, and interviews stating that higher education needs to embrace “disruptive change,” treat students like customers, and become more entrepreneurial. In short, colleges must adopt a business model, or like blacksmith shops in the age of automobiles, find themselves mere curios, quaint but outmoded heritage industries. This attack comes from all quarters: government, think tanks, policy wonks, and college administrators with time to kill.

But as the ranks of full-time faculty steadily shrink, and the ranks of adjuncts and administrators rise, it’s clear that inaction will lead to a race to the bottom.¹

David Bordelon is an associate professor of English at Ocean County College in Toms River, New Jersey, where he teaches a variety of composition and literature courses. His scholarship focuses on 19th century American literature with an emphasis on print culture. As the president of the Faculty Association of Ocean County College (faocc.org), he is putting to practice what he preaches.
And no one wants to be the last professor cast out of Corporate U.

So what’s the plan? How can faculty stem the “business as usual” tide that permeates so much of the discourse in higher education today?

What follows are a series of suggestions gleaned from research on higher education trends, education, and psychology. Most will be familiar—they are things academics know we should do. Collected together they seem less formidable: a way to shift from a shrug to action. And that is what is needed now: action. The suggestions that follow can be grouped into three broad, easy-to-recall categories: (1) information, (2) communication, (3) determination.

So what’s the plan? How can faculty stem the “business as usual” tide that permeates so much of the discourse in higher education today?

INFORMATION

Public discussion about the future of higher education abounds with confusions of purpose, faulty cause and effect, straw men arguments, and false analogies. What’s needed is specific, accurate information to reshape a mental landscape that has been distorted with the discourse and mental armature of the corporate world. “Credentialing.” “Silos.” “Stakeholders.” “Branding.” This is what now passes as cogent thinking about higher education. Oddly, despite the recent track record of business in America, these metaphors have somehow captured the imagination of many interested in post-secondary education. While it’s easy for academics to dismiss this as the blather of business, the words used to frame discussions about college matter because, as Neil Postman observed in his prescient *The End of Education*, “A metaphor is not an ornament. It is an organ of perception.” The ramifications for education are many. As Postman suggests, “Are [students] patients to be cared for? Troops to be disciplined? Sons and daughters to be nurtured? Personnel to be trained? Resources to be developed?” Given the entrepreneurial bent of the actors currently strutting on the higher education stage, it’s clear they believe students are resources to be exploited: walking wallets. Luckily for academics—and students—the most common arguments invoked to describe college as a business can be easily refuted.

Information: Delivery v. Education

Delivery of content and education are not the same thing, and yet their conflation forms the basis of many misperceptions in higher education today. For example, *The Chronicle’s* Jeffery Selingo argues in *College Unbound* that the core purpose
of college is “information delivery.” Disproving this canard entails a simple explanation of the difference between delivery and learning. Yes, information can be “delivered,” but multiple modes of information isn’t new at all: remember lectures, books, tele-courses, and the Great Courses audio and DVD series? If delivery was truly at the core of education, Gutenberg nailed the coffin shut on innovation in the 15th century. Print, whether on paper or pixels, can easily provide much of the information delivered on campus.

The problem with Selingo’s argument is that the purpose of college is education, and actual education doesn’t occur on the page or online. It’s what students do with information that results in “higher” learning. What skills do they develop? Can they take existing information and make it into something new? Noam Chomsky offers a challenge to the ideology of education as content, noting that the purpose of college isn’t “to pour information into somebody’s head which will then leak out.” Instead it should “enable [students] to become creative, independent people who can find excitement in discovery and creation and creativity at whatever level or in whatever domain their interests carry them.” The true “disruption” isn’t education itself; it’s in how material and instruction can be presented.

Exhibit A in the confusion between delivery and education are massive, open, online courses, or MOOCs. With their elimination of pesky faculty and emphasis on a star system of professors (think Harvard, think branding), MOOCs best represent the latest iteration of Corporate U. Pro-business pundits such as Friedman, with his usual breathless ardor, write that “nothing has more potential to enable us to reimagine higher education than the massive open online course, or MOOC, platforms that are being developed by the likes of Stanford and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and companies like Coursera and Udacity.” Given his embrace of all things entrepreneurial, it’s no surprise that Selingo, who like Friedman believes that “American higher education has lost its way,” sees MOOCs as the “turning point” in the current “revolution” sweeping higher ed. In the summer of 2011, Teresa Sullivan, president of the University of Virginia, discovered the hard way the revolutionary power MOOCs hold over the unenlightened. Her board of trustees fell under the sway of Friedman’s gospel of technology and forced her to resign because they felt she wasn’t moving quickly enough to join the open course bandwagon with Harvard and Stanford. But those preaching the MOOC gospel have been presented with evidence that theirs
is a false god. The latest data from the MOOC Research Initiative, a Bill and Melinda Gates cheering squad for all things MOOC, shows that from student persistence to academic quality, they fail to live up to their hype.\textsuperscript{13}

The acolytes of the tech gods seem to forget that a major part of education involves feedback from people with a deep understanding of the field of knowledge under discussion. And who will provide this feedback? Who will stand in the labs, showing students the subtle differences between a \textit{Pseudomonas aeruginosa} and a \textit{Pseudomonas fluorescens}? Or sit in an office patiently explaining why a more specific example from \textit{The Things They Carried} is needed to show that it is really a love story? Or provide suggestions on the draft of an essay weighing the differences between the Chicago and behavioral school economists? That’s where the carbon-based delivery system—a teacher—comes in.

\textbf{Information: Students are not Customers}

More than 10 years ago, West Virginia’s Higher Education Chancellor J. Michael Mullen voiced the concern of the business-minded: “But if institutions don’t treat students as customers, it’s possible that they’ll take their nickels and dimes somewhere else.”\textsuperscript{14} This idea, that students are consumers, not learners, has become one of the most pernicious aspects of the businessification of higher education. It reduces the faculty/student relationship to the profit motive. One obvious problem with this logic is that there are many other models to adopt. Why not an apprentice model? An intern model? Or the teacher/student model which has existed for ages?

At its most basic level, the customer analogy doesn’t work. Students don’t buy credits; they earn them. Education is not a simple transaction.
transaction. Should colleges and faculty treat students as dollar signs or as people interested in learning and mental growth? We can point to the recent catastrophe of the financial industry to see how “clients” or “customers” are treated when they are viewed, to borrow the words of Chancellor Mullen, as so many “nickels and dimes.”

**Information: Education is not a Commodity**

Closely connected to the student-as-customer fallacy is the notion that education is a commodity, like pork bellies or wheat futures. This fits nicely into a corporate model where student learning is just like any other product, something to be quantified, packaged, and then sold at a profit. This confusion is understandable. Books are a commodity. Classrooms are a commodity. Laptops are a commodity. Even the labor of teaching is a kind of commodity. All of these contribute to learning, but they are not education itself.

The hope of entrepreneurs is that education can be commodified and packaged into an online pellet, much like Willy Wonka’s dream of a meal in a pill. For them, it’s all about monetizing: start with an initial investment, and then sit back and wait for high returns to a small group of investors. This dream is coming to fruition through the efforts of publishers such as Pearson and Kaplan, who offer packages of “modules” designed to “teach” students. A market cycle is created when these “products” are then proselytized in advertisements masquerading as scholarship. But higher learning is not an MP3 file or a bit or pixel. Yes, students can register and pay online for a course; yes, they can get “content” online, but because a life of the mind is ephemeral, education cannot be transferred and sold to the highest bidder. While the actual desire for education is subject to the laws of supply and demand and income (is there an opening at College X? Can I afford the tuition?), education itself is determined and limited by factors such as individual interests, skills, and temperament, and thus doesn’t lend itself easily to a symbol to be tracked on the Dow ticker. Of course the University of Phoenix’s profits can be tracked and reported in the *Wall Street Journal*, but again, that’s the business side of education, not education itself.

**Information: Follow the Money**

The real disruption at play here is economic. While politicians and others preach the importance of higher education and worry about America’s ability to
This painting is by Sibel Kocabasi, an adjunct faculty member at Palm Beach State College in Florida. For more of her work, visit sibelkocabasi.com.
compete in global markets, they don’t want to pay for it. In 2008, for instance, the chancellor of the University of Tennessee proposed that the state’s higher education institutions adopt a “business model” to compensate for a “projected 20 percent cut in state funding.” The disruptive force here involved the elimination of teachers from the educational model; students willing to “work online with no direct support from a faculty member” would receive a tuition discount. Eliminating the teacher from the course, however, is merely a symptom of the larger social disease: the problem is less a crisis of funding than of priority. While the public clamors for college for all, it balks at the costs such an effort entails.

The worship of business ideology, and its concomitant love of management, leads to a trickle-down effect on campuses, which are now awash with consultants...

The math is clear: between 1985 and 2010, the ratio of funds for public institutions was reversed, with state or public funds dropping from two- to one-third of institutional revenues, while tuition rose from one- to two-thirds. The calls among college trustees and administrators for a business model follow a predictable pattern; the people leading the charge are seldom those providing (teachers) or receiving (students) the education. Trustees, often chosen from the ranks of successful business people in the hope of donational largesse, are more enamored with the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* than the *New York Review of Books*. For example, the board that orchestrated the ouster of Teresa Sullivan, headed by real estate developer Helen Dragas, resorted to business-speak to describe the problem at the University of Virginia: it needed “systemic restructuring,” code words for firing people and bringing in new bodies. More generally, they are often connected to pro-business think tanks or political parties that stand to gain from a pro-business approach. Benjamin Ginsberg reports that some board members “make insider deals in which the institution purchases goods, services, or property from companies linked to their board members.” As such, they stand to financially benefit by diverting some of the funds from the cash cow that is higher education into their own coffers. This worship of business ideology, and its concomitant love of management, leads to a trickle-down effect on campuses, which are now awash with consultants, administrators, and support staff. The New England Center for Investigative Journalism recently published a report that provides a number to a phenomena most of us have noticed on campuses: administrative and professional staff levels have increased by more than half over the last 25 years. This is all at the expense of faculty, the personnel with whom students have the most contact.

A more direct point to address is the shift from full- to part-time teachers.
In 1975, part-timers made up 43.2 percent of faculty; by 2011, the number was 70.2 percent. And the word choice is important here: part-time, not contingent. Teachers, not faculty. This more direct language communicates more clearly to the public what is at stake: time and teaching. Do students want teachers who are harried and running from school to school trying to patch together a lower-middle class life? Or do they want a stable, engaged faculty interested in maintaining long-term contact with them? Do employers and taxpayers want teachers who are “incentivized” to please students with an “easy A” due to fear of non-renewal? Or do they want tenured full-time faculty who are free to provide an academically rigorous education?

These questions all point to the damage visited upon colleges when an education based on money instead of instruction is the rule. Caveat emptor, indeed.

COMMUNICATION

While this pool of information is helpful, faculty can’t just talk to themselves. Communication with the public is the necessary next step. Unfortunately, there’s an established narrative peddled by media darlings such as ex-Washington D.C. School Chancellor Michelle Rhee and the various anti-union groups associated with the billionaire, right-wing Koch brothers. Their message boils down to a slogan ready-made for a public looking for someone to blame: education in America sucks because teachers have too much power. They suggest it’s time to clean up Dodge and treat it like any other industry: “Let the experts take over and all will be well.” Unsurprisingly, their “experts” tout a corporate agenda.

But this default turn to “business as savior” provides a weakness that can be readily exploited. Working to our advantage is the public respect—alone, it appears, among major institutions—that higher education possesses. A 2011 Lumina/Gallup poll found that 70 percent of Americans are satisfied with the “quality of American colleges and universities.” In the same year, a Gallup survey on confidence found that “Big Business” could only muster a 19 percent approval rating. Obviously, those fighting Corporate U. would have a willing audience. What should we say to them? For starters, we need to expose the fallacies regarding education and business (noted above), and then connect them to the lack of trust in corporations.

Here we can borrow a lesson from the masters of coercive messaging and branding: corporate America. But this poses an immediate problem. How to get a group of people trained to think independently—the professoriate—to present the
cohesive front necessary for a messaging campaign? One way is to appeal to our innate desire to educate. The public has been sold a false bill of goods, providing us with a “teaching moment.” How to address this moment, as academics are well aware, varies depending on the audience. For campus consumption, the Princeton economist Daniel Kahneman offers a dense but cogent discourse. His language, and the theories behind it, including “affect heuristic,” “availability cascade,” and “planning fallacy,” are drawn from a wealth of cognitive research, and can be used to combat the errors in the college-is-failing-so-we-need-to-turn-to-business-for-help line of thinking.28

For the general public, frame the issue by appealing to prevailing anxieties about stagnant wages for workers (the 99 percent), rising salaries for administrators (the 1 percent), and the exploitation of students who pay full tuition for part-time workers. As noted earlier, words matter. Workers. Teachers. Students. Overpaid administrators. Out-of-touch trustees. Full time. Part time. Profit motive. These words and phrases can move the debate, making it part of the growing discontent with the corporatization of America.

But directly refuting the party lines—delivery is not education; students are not consumers; education is not a commodity; beware of corporate influence—is not enough. What we need is a narrative shift from a disruptive to academic view of higher education. This shift is crucial because it negates the caricature of faculty as out of touch and motivated by mere self-interest.29 Faculty must focus on what they understand: education. To that end, Andrew Delbanco provides a list of the “qualities of mind” which can serve as a template for a more positive, less defensive narrative on the meaning and purpose of college. He writes that it should provide:

A skeptical discontent with the present, informed by a sense of the past.

The ability to make connections among seemingly disparate phenomena.

Appreciation of the natural world, enhanced by knowledge of science and the arts.

A willingness to imagine experience from perspectives other than one’s own.

A sense of ethical responsibility.30

While this can—and will—be amended by individual faculty, such a list should be part of an academic’s rhetorical arsenal. Its appeal lies in its inviolability: who

would disagree with any of these ideas? And that is what is needed, an endorsement of an authentic college education, with its compassion and rigor intact, unmediated by the profit motive.

Of course digital media provides a ready and inexpensive platform for dissemination of these ideas. A website with a collection of budget documents from specific schools detailing the millions of dollars spent on consultants, administrative salaries, and retreats can open the eyes of taxpayers ready to pounce on fiscal mismanagement. Blog posts, tweets, or letters to the editor can provide an intelligent and sustained counter narrative to the prevailing gospel of disruption, and spread the good word about the need for genuine higher education. With an emphasis on the positive, faculty can explain how a business-first agenda is antithetical to true education. And if trustees turn a deaf ear to faculty concerns, go right up the food chain to local, state, and federal government officials, with appropriately pitched messages to each. While trustees may not listen to faculty, they do respond to political pressure: faculty need to start pressing the appropriate buttons.

More direct action can help as well. Picket lines remain an effective way to get media attention: video loves a protest. The key is to remain on message. For this kind of action, designed for public consumption, participants should agree and prepare two or three talking points—and be ready to direct journalists or potential allies to websites with additional information. Collecting e-mail addresses, Twitter accounts, and mobile phone numbers for text blasts can expand communication networks beyond the confines of a campus. Students are often interested in pushing back against corporate agendas as well. At UVA, students protested Sullivan’s ouster by spray painting G-R-E-E-D on the colonial-era columns of the rotunda.31 For a nation in thrall of spectacle, such actions are tailor-made to focus attention, and once attention is gained, faculty can do what they do best: instruct.

DETERMINATION

But to be blunt, we face a long haul. Faculty now find themselves tasked with explaining the reality of college education to an audience conditioned to accept a myth. At times this will seem like a Sisyphean ordeal. We must prepare to be discouraged and to lose many battles but, also, ultimately to win the war. (Given how beleaguered most faculty feel, military metaphors are inevitable). Those who see college as a business have one thing in their favor: money, and the time and energy it can buy. They can write (or more likely, hire ghostwriters to write) propagandist reports, shift funding, attend meetings and retreats with like-minded people, all to further their agenda. Meanwhile, those who actually do the “business” of college are too busy preparing lessons, keeping abreast of the latest research, grading papers, or teaching in a classroom to explain the obvious: college exists for the education of students, not the predations of business.

Yet there are victories we should celebrate and look to for instruction. President Sullivan’s victory over the UVA board is a sign that, with a united front, the rush for corporatization can be stemmed, and more thoughtful and measured
thinking about college administration and instruction can be maintained. A num-
ber of recent editorials in the New York Times criticizing the rise of administration
and the growth of part-time faculty demonstrate that the problems of “it” are no
longer solely the province of campus hallway conversations.32

Faculty need to add their voices to the long continuum of American resistance
to domination by the powerful. We need to follow the example of that icon of
prickly intelligence, Henry David Thoreau, whose “Civil Disobedience” offers a
philosophy well-suited to the avocational nature of teaching: “Let your life be a
counter-friction to stop the machine.”33

Yes, it’s time to apply counter friction. It’s time to stop it.

ENDNOTES

Bush administration’s Secretary of Education Margaret Spelling, Obama’s various “Race to the
Top” initiatives, and from the academy, Christensen and Eyring The Innovative University:
Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out.

2. For Friedman, the disruption is centered around online course delivery. In addition to
“Revolution,” see his “Come the Revolution,” “Breakfast Before the MOOC,” and “The
Professors’ Big Stage.” Christensen and Horn, “How Disruption Can Help Colleges Thrive.”
For an excellent rebuttal of the change agenda, see Lepore, “The Disruption Machine.”

3. Contingent faculty made up 75.5 percent of the total in 2009. See “A Portrait of Part-Time
Faculty Members,” The Coalition on the Academic Workforce. For administrators, see
Marcus, “New Analysis Shows Problematic Boom In Higher Ed Administrators.”

4. The recent track record is best exemplified by the 2008 banking crisis and resistance to any
regulatory change that could prevent it from occurring again.


6. Ibid., p. 145.


9. Ibid.


11. Selingo, College Unbound.

12. Rice, “Anatomy of a Campus Coup.” After pressure from both within and without the univer-
sity, they rehired her.

13. Straumsheim, “Confirming the MOOC Myth.”

College Week.

Partnerships in Higher Education.” Game Changers: Education and Information Technologies,
in which this essay appears, is published by Educause “with generous support from Ellucian”
(n.p.), seems less a rigorous, peer reviewed examination of an issue than a 402 page puff piece
for various companies to shill their digital wares. Ellucian, an IT provider for many colleges,
promises to “deliver a broad portfolio of technology solutions, developed in collaboration with
a global education community, and provide strategic guidance to help education institutions of
all kinds navigate change, achieve greater transparency, and drive efficiencies” (“About”). See
also Pearson’s advertisement “Online.” Tellingly, this is from a section aimed at “Academic
Executives,” not faculty.
16. *Game Changers* is emblematic of similar collections that offer a way for IT staff (along with a few faculty converts) to gain academic credibility by “publishing” the work they are paid to do, often in conjunction (and sometimes funded by) the very corporate entity they are praising. More ominously, given its placement in *The Chronicle* (a supposedly more objective venue), consider “Disruption is Good,” an “essay” with the caveat “Information provided by Canvas by Instructure,” praising technology as a kind of digital Shiva: both destroyer and creator. Is it an advertisement? An essay? *The Chronicle* web site keeps it ambiguous. These incursions into “scholarly” publications suggest how deeply corporate propaganda has infiltrated higher education.

17. Quoted in Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty*.

18. Ibid.

19. For an excellent overview on the negative feedback cycle of politics, economics, and higher education, see Fischer and Stripling “An Era of Neglect.”

20. Rampell, “Where the Jobs Are, the Training May Not Be.”


22. Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty*.


25. For a review of the literature on the effectiveness of part time teachers, see Ochoa “Contingent Faculty: Helping Or Harming Students?”


27. “Confidence in Institutions,” *Gallup*.


29. For an amusing example of this view, see Schram, “Ivory Tower Eggheads to Monitor Stop and Frisk.” The article reports on a judicial decision ordering academic oversight of New York City’s Stop and Frisk policy. The title photo—a bespectacled and befuddled looking man in a suit and mortar board hat—and opening line, “A panel of 13 Ivory Tower eggheads,” are caricatures in themselves.

30. Delbanco, *College: What it is, was, and should be*.


32. Cf. the editorials “The New College Campus,” “The Trouble with Online College,” and Lewin’s “After Setbacks, Online Courses Are Rethought.” Lepore’s “The Disruption Machine,” op cit, is another recent push back against “it.”


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State U. vs. Target: Who Gets the Better Grade for Employee Treatment?

by Claire Boeck

The miserable pay of adjuncts and the transformation of colleges and universities into business are no longer foreign concepts in the public realm. What is a surprise, though, is that large companies, such as Target and Starbucks, take better care of their employees than those in higher education. I am not focusing this article on the social and academic consequences of the corporate culture that has been adopted by colleges and universities, but on the contrast between the way these institutions treat their employees and the much more humane way some large corporations treat theirs. This is especially troubling because the college or university should foster critical thinking, ethical responsibilities, and a meritocratic structure. The educational institutions of America are falling behind large corporations in upholding a moral standard.

Poor Pay, No Benefits

Recent articles such as “Death of an Adjunct” and “The Ph.D. Now Comes with Food Stamps” have raised awareness of the adjunct’s plight. This is a national issue that transcends the type of institution or region. Henry Giroux, citing data gathered by the Junct Rebellion, states, “in the United States out of 1.5 million faculty members, one million are ‘adjuncts who are earning, on average, $20,000 a year gross, with no benefits or healthcare, no unemployment insurance when they are out of work.’”

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It would be ludicrous to argue that adjuncts are the only workers who are underpaid; the May 2014 strike involving fast-food employees in 30 countries demonstrates that many feel underpaid and want to make the public aware of their economic struggle. However, a career as an adjunct is considerably different from many of these other jobs due to the high levels of education required of adjuncts, either a master’s degree or Ph.D, and also their decreased career mobility. Even though 56.5 percent of adjuncts have been teaching for over five years, and 10.6 percent for more than 20, they are still part-time and do not have job security. Meanwhile, fast-food workers do have a career ladder. “This industry

While it may be a slow climb, some major corporations actually promote and reward successful employees. Not so in academia.

is the embodiment of the American dream for many workers.... Eighty percent of restaurant owners started at the bottom and 90 percent of managers started in entry-level jobs. There’s an obvious ladder to move up,” said Justin Winslow, the Michigan Restaurant Association’s head of government affairs, to a USA Today reporter. While it might be a slow climb, some major corporations actually promote and reward successful employees. Not so in academia, where people remain as adjuncts for decades or leave the teaching profession altogether to search for higher paying jobs.

Work part-time at financially successful multinational and national corporations such as Target, Starbucks, Land’s End, Whole Foods, Home Depot, UPS, and Costco, and you will be offered health benefits, stock options, and tuition reimbursement. Work part-time at a college or university and face new wage cuts as many of those institutions seek to circumvent the federal Affordable Health Care Act by slashing adjuncts’ and tutors’ hours. “We’re not allowed to go over 29 hours, and that includes time spent prepping, grading, e-mailing, meeting with students, attending required meetings,” Stark State College English adjunct Allison Armentrout told the Chronicle of Higher Education. “What is happening—and I’m finding this even with just two classes—because of the grading load, I’ve been put in a position twice this semester where I’ve just had to lie about the number of hours I actually worked. I don’t want to have to make a choice between having a job or not.” The irony of Armentrout’s additional statement, “There will be a lot more professors working at McDonald’s,” is that there is at least a ladder to climb at McDonald’s. Starbucks offers comprehensive health care and paid vacation time for employees who work more than 20 hours a week. Even Walmart, the dubious star of the documentary Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Prices and the critical book The United States of Wal-Mart “is a more honest employer of part-
time employees than are most colleges and universities,” A.G. Monaco, a senior human resources administrator at the University of Akron, told Inside Higher Ed.9

When the numbers are compared, it is clear where the stronger earning opportunities can be found. The average annual salary for an adjunct in the U.S. is between $20,000 and $25,000, while sales workers earn slightly more ($25,370), and baristas and counter food-servers just a bit less ($19,650).10 These incomes look fairly similar, but student loan debt must also be taken into account. Consider that 40.2 percent of adjuncts having master’s degrees and 30.4 percent doctorates, and that the median debt load for people who borrow for graduate school was $57,600 in 2012.11 Many individuals also have undergraduate student loans: the average debt is now approaching $30,000.12 Another point of comparison is healthcare. The Coalition on the Academic Workforce 2012 survey found that 4.3 percent of adjuncts receive employer-provided healthcare benefits, a significantly smaller rate than the 13 percent of fast-food workers who get that care.13 While neither number is encouraging, the fast-food industry still puts higher education to shame.

Even Walmart “is a more honest employer of part-time employees than are most colleges and universities.”

MERITOCRACY IS PART OF THE MISSION

What makes this all the more disturbing is that higher education is an instrument of meritocracy, providing the opportunity to create a more level playing field and a means to avoid working hourly jobs at companies such as those listed above. Through words and legislation, Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama have reinforced colleges’ and universities’ role in promoting social mobility.14 In his town hall talk at Binghamton University, for example, Obama declared, “I think the essence of the American dream is that anybody who is willing to work hard is able to get that good education and achieve their dreams.”15 A college degree makes well-paying careers a possibility for people from troubled or poor backgrounds, and this is the way Americans want it; we want an educational system that helps “translate the American Dream into practice” and that works to eliminate traditional obstacles to success, such as race, ethnicity, and religion.16 The reality that institutions of higher education advertise and facilitate this process for their students but not for their educators is cruel, unusual, and antithetical to the purpose of education in America. According to Giroux, “Higher education represents one of the most important sites over which the battle for democracy
is being waged. It is the site where the promise of a better future emerges out of those visions and pedagogical practices that combine hope, agency, politics, and moral responsibility as part of a broader emancipatory discourse.17

Institutions of higher education should be paragons of merit equality and justice, dedicated to improving society as a whole. Their work is considered a “public good, rather than just another consumer industry,” writes a Slate Magazine editor, and their graduates are supposed to be ethical, humanitarian citizens, but the poor treatment of their own adjuncts demonstrates that institutions of higher education themselves are insufficient role models for ethical behavior.18 Even if these ideas and values do not originate within higher education, these institutions have historically upheld them. “In a sense, higher education imports equity and social justice agendas from the wider society,” write John Brennan and Rajani Naidoo, “and, in common with other large organizations, looks at ways of improving its performance in these respects.”19 Compared to the commendable policies large corporations are implementing, higher education has so far ignored society’s demand for more equitable pay, benefits, and overall fair treatment of part-time employees.

On the issues of pay, benefits, promotions, and more, corporations are proving it is actually possible to be financially successful and treat employees right. Those that treat their workers ethically set an example for the business world. Higher education should find this embarrassing, troubling, and hopefully also enlightening. Colleges and universities offer advanced courses in ethics, yet when it comes to fair treatment of their employees they fail Ethics 101. We must all demand they put these lessons into practice.

ENDNOTES

2. Giroux, “Public Intellectuals Against the Neoliberal University.” The Junct Rebellion is an organization dedicated to raising awareness about adjunct labor and how it affects the future of higher education and students. For more information, see http://junctrebellion.wordpress.com/about/.
3. Alcindor et al., “Fast Food Workers Rally for Higher Wages.”
6. Kim, “Seven Companies Offering Health Care Benefits to Part-Time Workers.”
11. Coalition on the Academic Workforce, “A Portrait of Part-Time Faculty Members,” p. 23 and Clark, “Debt is Piling Up Faster for Most Graduate Students – but Not MBAs.”
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17. Giroux, “Public Intellectuals Against the Neoliberal University.”

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A Consideration of Online Learning

by Theresa Capra

Online learning has become a permanent fixture on college campuses. For the past decade, enrollment in online courses has grown faster than the overall student body throughout higher education. This phenomenon is not surprising and, in fact, is part of a history of people seeking more flexible alternatives to traditional, face-to-face instruction. For example, the University of Chicago began to offer correspondence courses through the mail in the 1890s. Then, during the 20th century, people experimented with radio and television to deliver instruction. But when a browser for the World Wide Web was developed in the 1990s and Internet courses with images and audio ensued, many people believed they would leave traditional courses in the dust. However, like their predecessors, it’s probably a case of trial, and mostly error.

The benefits of online learning are undeniable. Barriers inherent in traditional learning such as time, space, location, and access are eliminated with asynchronous Internet courses. But all that glitters is not gold. In its present form, online learning is far from a substitute for traditional instruction and may be damaging to certain students, even faculty. In a previous Thought & Action, Susan Meisenhelder exposes the fallacies and problems swirling around massive open online courses (MOOCs). This article will further the discussion by showing that the issues are

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“Phone Booth” is part of a series of photographs titled *Kid City* by Suzanne Camp Crosby, a full-time faculty member at Hillsborough Community College in Florida. For more of her work, visit [www.suzannecampcrosby.com](http://www.suzannecampcrosby.com).
A CONSIDERATION OF ONLINE LEARNING

not limited to rogue MOOCs, but instead permeate an established and lucrative staple on most college campuses: online courses.

INCREASED FAILURE AND ATTRITION

Similar to MOOCs, credit-bearing online courses are exacerbating achievement gaps, particularly for academically weak students. Immense investments in technology, training, and technological support for students have resulted in well-oiled machines that are not always pedagogically sound. Their singular mission—to increase student access to education by providing asynchronous courses—may not be feasible for many students, especially low-income, first-generation, academically underprepared, inner-city and rural students, according to several studies from the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University. Ironically, many institutions tout the ability of online learning to overcome the obstacles generally encountered by nontraditional students (e.g., no transportation or child care) when pursuing higher education.

This problem is not exclusive to community colleges. For many institutions, including four-year universities, online education is creating an interesting paradox: growing demand and enrollment coupled with higher withdrawal and failure rates. The Babson Survey Research Group, which has tracked online learning in the U.S. for the past decade, reports that retention in online courses is a growing concern for college administrators. Additionally, those for-profit, fully online institutions that instigated the virtual craze are leaving a dubious track record. The largest of the pack, the University of Phoenix, was placed on probation by accreditors in 2013 due to multiple issues including low graduation and retention rates, and high incidences of defaulted student loans.

Coincidently, many studies have presented a positive response by students to online learning. Often they favor online learning and perceive it to be just as good, or even better, than traditional classroom settings. Additionally, the Babson Group has reported that faculty and academic officers increasingly believe that online learning is tantamount to traditional instruction despite issues with retention. These factors, coupled with unyielding student demand, have generated the perception that online learning is the wave of the future, the conqueror of those “talk and chalk” ways. But it may be preemptive to put down the chalk. As it turns out, this perception is overstated. The Community College Research Center has also uncovered that much of the favorable research about online education deemed “rigorous” by a U.S. Department of Education meta-analysis was based upon “high-achieving” students, or “abridged” educational settings (e.g., professional development activities). Furthermore, upon closer examination, the large body of literature concerning online education is conflicted, inconsistent, and even exaggerated.

The question of whether or not online learning is rigorous has been a common subject for researchers. Perhaps a less investigated question is whether or not online courses are perfunctory. Anyone who has taken or taught an online course
has probably found it, at least to some extent, to be a monotonous experience. Of course, we all have endured a snooze fest or two in face-to-face settings, but the nature and design of most online courses can amplify the tedium that often results from regimented learning. It has been demonstrated that online courses typically keep students quite busy with layers of similar assignments that require hours of typing and reading but provide little opportunity for deeper application or cognitive stimulation. The posting of lecture notes that mirror the textbook; the creation of PowerPoints that speak key points; quizzes generated from test banks; and superficial discussion board questions culminate to produce a perfunctory, dry experience. In this case, managing the workload becomes the learning objective. Courses designed in this manner may appear rigorous because of the amount of work required, but they are not rigorous in a cognitive sense. For teachers, it is a similar situation; reading repetitive discussion threads and answering copious e-mails from faceless students can be a burdensome task.

**The Social Abyss**

It might seem logical to presume that modern students, especially Millennials for whom texting and status updates are preferred over conversation, would naturally mesh with online learning. This is not true. Online courses can be isolating, impersonal, and disengaging, even for tech savvy young adults. Research has suggested that high rates of failure and attrition in online courses may result from a sense of perceived isolation. Many instructors attempt to produce social interactions by creating mandatory discussion boards that require a minimum number of peer responses. However, these boards frequently end up being a detached chore.

Instructors are not inoculated from this social anonymity. In contrast to face-to-face teaching, faculty rarely engages in pedagogical dialogue about online instruction. Observations in online classrooms are not common resulting in limited opportunities for reflection. Online professors tend to “teach” and “develop” courses in isolation. These practices contradict some of the basic tenets underpinning the teaching profession, which suggest that reflection and collaboration help us develop our practice.

Research that has examined the impact of online learning on student achievement and satisfaction has consistently demonstrated the significance of the course instructor. But what makes an excellent online teacher? Most research that has attempted to address this question has based the answer on best practices. These

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*We all have endured a snooze fest or two in face-to-face settings, but the nature and design of most online courses can amplify the tedium.*
practices, which include prompt e-mail responses, timely grades and feedback, and a steady presence within the course shell, are helpful. However, they do not necessarily produce a high-quality learning experience. Other research has noted that students have extreme difficulty perceiving instructional presence even when an instructor is following best practices. According to Mark Edmundson, a professor of English at the University of Virginia, online teaching is a “one-size fits all endeavor.” There is nothing that an online teacher can give a student that a good book can’t.

When I ask my students, who are predominantly education majors, to recall their favorite teachers, their descriptions usually reveal the importance of intangibles; abstract and elusive qualities that great teachers exude: passion, enthusiasm, humor, just to name a few. Unfortunately, this dynamic is very difficult to transport to an online classroom. As Edmundson pointed out, “online teaching is a monologue.” Thus, great online teachers are defined by unmemorable best practices such as answering emails, updating announcements, or submitting grades.

MANAGERS OR TEACHERS?

In her *Thought & Action* article, Meisenhelder pointed out that faculty are largely absent from the discussion of MOOCs and their place in higher education. Well, the problem is a lot closer to our front door; standard online college courses may be diminishing the value of faculty. Many institutions are removing the need for faculty expertise during the course-design process. Colleges are moving more toward the creation of cookie-cutter, ready-made courses that can be rolled over to anyone, anytime. Textbook publishers are also aiding in this effort by supplying most of the material necessary to develop a fully online course—plug and play compatible with the major learning management systems.

On the one hand, these prototypes can ensure consistency for students, on the other, they completely remove any individual contributions that faculty can, and should add. And while it’s true that even face-to-face courses are bound by a designated curriculum and course outline, this is merely a skeleton; in person, the teaching and learning process is dynamic and fluid with instructors who consistently add, subtract, enhance, or extend, based on the contours of the classroom.

When a course has been prefabricated, an instructor is immediately removed and disconnected from its content. Some institutions, especially for-profit ones, realize this, and consequently try to track instructional time the same way some
instructors tally (and attempt to force) student participation. This usually entails a minimum amount of online activity and forum postings—a tangible footprint to “measure your teaching.” These policies attempt to define efficacy, for both teacher and student, with a rubric built around compliance rather than depth of learning or individual development. Of course teachers and students must be present, regardless of the type of classroom. But under these circumstances, learning becomes sterile; a business model that is boxed and packaged, limiting the potential for emergent and profound learning experiences.

**With engaged learning, creative uses of technologies such as video, virtual chats, and discussion boards are viewed as vehicles of expression.**

**THE FUTURE OF ONLINE LEARNING**

Despite these many challenges and limitations, many college administrators have declared the expansion of online learning as paramount to their institution’s futures. Online courses can potentially attract new students, boost enrollment, increase revenue, and use instructors from remote locations—without much in the way of infrastructure costs. Additionally, their convenience and flexibility are irrefutable. However, putting more courses online is unlikely to benefit anyone without acknowledgement and closer examination of the issues that impede student success and diminish their retention. So, as colleges all over continue to roll out online offerings, what can be done to engage and retain students?

First, institutional efforts should move beyond prepping and orienting students for an online course and examine the depth and level of learning that is occurring. Although significant attention has been paid to the role of orientations and readiness surveys for improving retention, research warns against an over-reliance on these items because students may not participate or perceive them to be beneficial. Additionally, most orientations are designed to facilitate an understanding of the technology and learning platform rather than the actual expectations of the learning environment, and more specifically the instructor. And while orientations are definitely important; we need to move beyond them to more consistent support mechanisms that can sustain student success throughout the semester. For example, assigning stronger and more seasoned students as peer leaders for some incentive, and providing mentoring for inexperienced online learners can decrease withdrawal and attrition.

Next, common practices that underscore the design of online courses should be reviewed and revamped. It’s true that the asynchronous nature of online courses
limits the scope of interactions while activities are constrained by technology. But current design practices may amplify these inherent weaknesses. Often, instructors begin the design process by considering the content and learning objectives—usually embodied in the textbook. Activities, assignments, and assessments are then built around these items and minimally determine whether or not a student did his or her homework. Student interactions are manufactured with mandatory discussion boards that are typically repetitive and dull. Instead, a less-is-more approach should be applied, with fewer, more substantial activities.

Similarly, the principle of engaged learning can help improve the design of online courses. In simple terms, all activities and assessments should be designed to challenge and engage students on the upper levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy. With engaged learning, creative uses of technologies such as videos, virtual chats, and discussion boards are viewed as vehicles of expression rather than the main teaching tools. Engaged learning also allows students to establish their own learning goals, to seek out and evaluate appropriate sources for learning, and to share them with peers. An example of this can be posing a question for the weekly topic and asking students to track down sources to aid in its understanding instead of composing canned responses. Students can share sources, perhaps in a class repository or even on a discussion board, and collectively determine their worth.

Why have a discussion board if a primary objective is to ascertain whether or not a student read a textbook chapter? There is probably little need for students to select and discuss varying chapter questions when the goal is to assess individual understanding. Likewise, if there is a designated truth or series of facts a student must arrive at, as is the case in many survey courses, a discussion forum is unsuitable. Problem-based learning, which is a constructivist approach that presents an ill-structured problem leading to multiple perspectives, has been found to be an effective way to engage online students in the course material. With this premise in mind, perhaps mathematics and science courses could reserve discussion boards for mandatory postings about a struggle, strategy, or eureka moment rather than rote answers of textbook questions.

Conclusions about the rigor of an online course should not pivot on the amount of tasks that are present; a meaningful workload should be the preferred goal. Of course, college courses require work and college itself requires time management and discipline. But many undergraduate online courses may be serving up busy work to compensate for the time that students would have spent physically in the classroom. Instead, the depth of the learning should take precedent when evaluating rigor.

Presently, online learning is the most viable alternative to face-to-face instruction on a college campus. Even hybrid and flipped models, which are gaining popularity, still require a consistent campus presence. As a faculty member in a community college who has taught online for 10 years and conducted extensive research on the topic, I have witnessed both the potential and detriment to online learning. I have come to believe that it’s not the renaissance of learning so fre-
quently extolled, at least for most undergraduates. It’s becoming painfully clear that we need to rethink Internet courses across the board.

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1. Allen and Seaman. “Changing Course: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the United States.”
2. McGivney, “Adult Student Persistence in Online Education: Developing a Model to Understand the Factors that Affect Adult Student Persistence in a Course.”
8. See Blumenstyk, “Panel Recommends Reaccrediting of U. of Phoenix, but Notes Concerns” and Kirkham, “University of Phoenix Accreditation Hits Snag as Panel Recommends Probation.”
10. Allen and Seamen op cit.
12. See, for instance, Herbert, “Staying the Course: A Study in Online Student Satisfaction and Retention,” Jaggars and Bailey, “Effectiveness of Fully Online Courses for College Students: Response to a Department of Education Meta-Analysis,” and Street, “Factors Influencing a Student’s Decision to Drop-Out or Persist in Higher Education Distance Learning.”
15. See Morris, “Anytime/Anywhere Online Learning: Does it Remove Barriers for Adult Learners” and “Exploring Community College Student Perceptions of Online Learning: Community of Inquiry.”
17. See, for instance, Aragon and Johnson, “Factors Influencing Completion and Non Completion of Community College Online Students,” pp. 146-58, Capra, “Online Education from the Perspective of Community College Students within the Community of Inquiry Paradigm,” pp. 108-121, McGivney, “Adult Student Persistence in Online Education: Developing a Model to Understand the Factors that Affect Adult Student Persistence in a Course,” and Herbert, “Staying the Course: A Study in Online Student Satisfaction and Retention.”
19. Edmundson, “The Trouble with Online Education.”
23. For a description of Bloom’s Taxonomy, go to: www2.odu.edu/educ/roverbau/Bloom/blooms_taxonomy.htm.
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College costs have risen starkly in recent years. According to Bloomberg News, college tuition and fees have increased a staggering 1,120 percent since 1978, or twice the rate of increase of medical expenses or the price of food and four times faster than the consumer price index. In 1960, students paid $2,260 for a year of tuition, fees, books, room and board, plus sundry living expenses at Princeton University. At Duke, that same year, total college costs added up to $1,470, at Penn State in-state residents paid $1,260, while Californians spent at mere $680 at UC Berkeley. Today, according to each university’s respective websites, those numbers have skyrocketed to $56,750 at Princeton (an increase of 2,511 percent), $61,404 at Duke (an increase of 4,177 percent), $27,984 to $28,654 for state from Florida to Texas, in states where the focus of higher education “reform” has been on economic costs, state governors have made the pursuit of a high-quality, $10,000 degree a priority of their administrations. The seductive aspect of a college degree at that cost is the simplicity of the idea: 10K is not too much to pay or borrow for a good that society has shown itself willing to support. Plus, it’s a very round number. But is it a realistic goal? Is it a “goal in search of a model?” Is it the MacGuffin of higher education reform, the plot device that drives action regardless of its viability?

College costs have risen starkly in recent years. According to Bloomberg News, college tuition and fees have increased a staggering 1,120 percent since 1978, or twice the rate of increase of medical expenses or the price of food and four times faster than the consumer price index. In 1960, students paid $2,260 for a year of tuition, fees, books, room and board, plus sundry living expenses at Princeton University. At Duke, that same year, total college costs added up to $1,470, at Penn State in-state residents paid $1,260, while Californians spent at mere $680 at UC Berkeley. Today, according to each university’s respective websites, those numbers have skyrocketed to $56,750 at Princeton (an increase of 2,511 percent), $61,404 at Duke (an increase of 4,177 percent), $27,984 to $28,654 for state

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residents at Penn State (an increase of at least 2,221 percent), and $22,398 at UC Berkeley (an increase of at least 5,062 percent). Across institutions, it’s clear that the cost of a college education is becoming prohibitively expensive at a time when the credentials that it provides are increasingly necessary for Americans to have a chance at economic prosperity.⁴

No wonder that $10,000 sounds attractive.

By focusing solely on total degree cost, the proponents of the 10K degree ignore other variables of the equation, including public funding, education quality, and faculty pay. Nonetheless, the economic and social realities, or consequences, of where the 10K degree leads us may be important to consider in determining whether this goal, a high-quality post-secondary education on the cheap, is worthy of further societal consideration. It is essential to dive into the numbers—and in this article, I will do so, exploring the implications around class sizes, faculty workload, infrastructure costs, and administrative spending at four-year colleges specifically. I will argue that it is possible to produce a college degree at a reasonable price, but that it requires new institutional focus on student learning.

It’s clear that the cost of a college education is becoming prohibitively expensive at a time when the credentials it provides are increasingly necessary.

Making the Numbers Work

I will approach the $10,000 degree by beginning on the $10,000 per year undergraduate degree, a number that closely approximates the cost at community colleges, according to the Delta Cost Project. ⁵ Let us also begin with a few assumptions: First, to graduate in four years, each student should take five three-credit courses per semester, or the equivalent, for a total of 40 classes and 120 credits.⁶ Second, let’s assume these colleges and universities are self-sustaining enterprises with no additional funding subsidies, such as alumni donations, tax dollars from state or federal governments, faculty grants, etc. With these assumptions, the math is very easy: each student pays approximately $1,000 per class.

Next, let’s consider teaching load. The American Association of University Professors recommends faculty take on no more than three three-credit courses per semester.⁷ If we further assume that the average salary and benefits of such an employee is $100,000 a year, the employee will need to teach 100 students in each of her six courses, or 17 students per class. But those classes must also generate enough revenue to cover the costs associated with infrastructure (e.g., heat in the classrooms, lights in the offices, and rock-climbing walls in the new fitness
centers), as well as the salary and benefits of the institution’s administrators. And the latter is no small expense.9

As Benjamin Ginsburg notes in The Fall of the Faculty, the numbers of higher education administrators and other professional staff are expanding at a much higher rate than revenue-generating faculty. From 1985 to 2005, while the number of students increased by 56 percent and the ranks of faculty by just 50 percent, the crowds of administrators and other staff on campuses grew by 85 and 240 percent, respectively.10 (Meanwhile, in constant dollars, faculty salaries have barely budged over the past decade, while average executive compensation grew 14 percent between 2009 and 2012, to an average of $544,544.) With these figures in mind, it’s clear that the significant increases in college operating costs that have become the incredible increases in student tuition are coming from the administrative and professional staff side, including infrastructure.11 Non-academic administrative costs have grown at the cost of faculty compensation and student financial aid; “universities with top-heavy executive spending also having more adjuncts, more tuition increases, and more administrative spending.”12

The one cost that is most obviously not leading to increased tuition cost is faculty pay. The recent partnership between Starbucks and Arizona State University’s online college, “shows just how much ‘profit margin’ there can be in a distance-education operation.”13 Even with a 59 percent discount, this program isn’t operating at a loss, which “suggests just how much institutions like ASU ordinarily subsidize their overall operations with revenue from distance education.”14 Critical analysis of higher education’s business model takes this relationship even further: faculty-taught classes (online, hybrid, and traditional), the only tuition-generating element of higher education, are subsidizing almost every other aspect of the university ecosystem.

Moving along, if we further assume a rule of thirds between faculty, administrators and staff, and infrastructure costs (current numbers show faculty account, on average, for 28 percent of the expenditures at public institutions and 33 percent at private), the university will need to triple the number of students per classroom, driving the average class size up to 50 (the low end of “very large,” according to the IDEA Center, a non-profit organization committed to improving learning on college campuses).15 This will result in an overall faculty-to-student ratio of 1:30.

Increasing class sizes appears, on the surface, to fix everything — more students per faculty equals budget solved!
per faculty equals budget solved! It turns out, however, that restrained class sizes are important to student learning:

Student average progress on course objectives the instructor rates as either essential or important is more than one-half standard deviation higher in small compared to very large classes. The advantage for small classes is especially evident in developing creative capacities (writing, inventing, designing, performing in art, music, drama, etc.) and communication skills (oral and written), where student progress is about a full standard deviation higher compared to very large classes. For medium-size classes, the advantage is nearly the same. When you compare small

**The most exploited strategy for cost-saving is the artificial increase of faculty size by hiring adjuncts and other contingent faculty.**

and medium-size classes with classes enrolling 100 or more students (of which there are over 6,000 in the database), the differences are even more staggering.\(^6\)

Assuming we care about quality in education, class sizes need to go down. However, to achieve the 10K degree, still the object of this numerical adventure, this means increasing the number of faculty—without increasing the price tag.

The most exploited strategy for cost-saving is the artificial increase of faculty size by hiring adjuncts and other contingent faculty such as graduate students, lecturers, instructors, and “visiting” or “acting” assistant professors. Contingent academic labor is now the norm rather than the exception (less than a quarter of postsecondary faculty were full-time, tenure-track professors in 2011), which suggests that this preferred method of cost-savings has already been tapped and is running dry.\(^7\) The proliferation of adjunct and part-time faculty in American higher education has been well covered in *Thought & Action*, so I won’t go into detail here. (Editor’s note: see “Faculty Matter: So Why Doesn’t Everyone Think So?” starting on page 29 of this issue.)

Convincing professors to teach more courses is another possible way to cut costs, though such increases in workload have been vehemently opposed by students, adjuncts, and tenured and tenure-track faculty—and, in many places, those increases would be restricted by collectively bargained contracts.\(^8\) Nonetheless, a wholesale switch in workload from three three-credit classes (3/3) per semester to four four-credit classes (4/4) would result in a savings of 33 percent on faculty personnel and also would reduce the average class size from 50 to 40 students. But it would not affect the faculty-to-student ratio of 1:30, and furthermore, it likely would diminish the faculty’s ability and willingness to shoulder administrative duties, which may result in a net increase in costs.\(^9\) A more sustainable model may
be to hire half of an institution’s faculty as research-driven professors with a 3/3 load and the other half as teaching-driven lecturers with 4/4: the average would hit 3/4 and offer alternate paths for faculty professional development.

NON-FACULTY FACTORS: ADMINISTRATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

A recent report from the Center for College Affordability and Productivity ends with a promising note about “the enormous potential financial savings from reductions in expenditures on non-instructional professional personnel,” which would lead to “very substantial tuition and/or appropriation reductions.” Universities today employ armies of non-academic professionals to provide services and erect “symbols of excellence” as accoutrements to entice wealthy students. At the same time, those institutions are doing all they can to attract more wealthier, out-of-state or international students to their campuses. The University of Alabama (UA), for example, through its Alabama Promise Scholarship, encourages in-state students to go to community colleges and then transfer to UA—and while the purported intent is to help poor students get to the flagship, the actual effect has been to make room for more out-of-state students. And UA is hardly alone: Eighteen percent of the University of Washington’s students come from other countries, never mind other states.

Perhaps Ginsburg is correct about the crux of the problem: two-thirds of the average institutional budget (that is administrative and professional personnel, plus infrastructure) is not generating revenue. The faculty, and, vicariously, the work that they do in actually educating students are suffering because they are not valued as highly. Instead, most institutions’ budgets prioritize non-education related amenities that function as high-powered magnets to attract wealthy students. Instead of competing on academic grounds, universities battle for prestige, or at least the illusion of it, shifting their institutional focus from educating students to improving their relative position along trendy institutional rankings, which, unsurprisingly, doesn’t work as planned and, rather, reinforces dominance by those who are already “elite.”

The only way to meet the $10,000 per year tuition goal is to strike a more appropriate balance between faculty, administration, and infrastructure. Rather than increasing teaching loads, let’s reduce administrative bloat, perhaps by making explicit the service expectations for administrators.
ing explicit the service expectations for administrators and making less opaque their impact on faculty evaluation, promotion, and pay. Additionally, restructuring faculty incentives away from winning grants and publishing (especially when the focus is on elite journals) and toward teaching may increase faculty willingness and desire to shoulder a greater teaching and/or administrative burdens.25

If each faculty member could take on an additional class per year, it would reduce faculty expense and decrease class size.26 If universities can reign in their administrative bloat and their infrastructure such that they combine for half of expenditures as opposed to two-thirds—this could happen if institutions prioritize learning over rock climbing—the math becomes much more feasible to meet the $10,000 per year goal. Every professor would need to generate merely twice his or her salary and benefits, rather than triple.27 With these changes, the typical three credit-hour course would have an average class size of 28.5 students, which is within the “medium” classification, according to the IDEA Center, with a faculty-to-student ratio of 1:20. With that in mind, the $10,000 per year college education is possible and sustainable.

**The 10K degree will necessitate degradations such as $25,000 annual salaries for faculty and average class sizes up to 110 students.**

**BUT WHAT ABOUT THE 10K DEGREE?**

Moving from $10,000 per year to the 10K degree will prove to be a much more difficult proposition. The viability of the $10,000 per year education delicately balances price, workload, and class size. The 10K degree will break the balance, necessitating significant degradations, such as $25,000 annual salaries for faculty, average class sizes of 110 students, with faculty-to-student ratios of 1:80, and/or teaching loads of up to 12 classes per semester. The much-heralded answer, massive online-only courses (popularly known as MOOCs), currently suffer from a 93 percent attrition rate.28 Even students who are considered “serious enrollees,” those who complete at least one assignment, have an attrition rate of 52 percent and make up no more than 10 percent of MOOC students.29 These preliminary findings reinforce the importance of smaller classes and dedicated faculty, who hold continuing employment and are paid professional salaries, to help cultivate and maintain students’ interest in their own education and learning.

The other current answer comes from Southern New Hampshire University’s (SNHU) College for America, which has officially launched a $10K bachelor’s degree program with options in health care management and communications
that saw its first cohort enrolling in Fall 2014. In lieu of formal classes, College for America offers a, “competency-based curriculum designed specifically for working adults and their employers.”[30] This program is currently available only through partnerships with specific employers such as: Dunkin’ Donuts, McDonalds, Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield, ConAgra Foods, and Goodwill Industries. It is presumed that the student-employees would not be burdened by paying for this program because, “the employers would be the ones paying the cost through their tuition assistance programs.”[31] This form of education looks quite different from the traditional model; a difference by design because of the gulf between academic leaders and business leaders regarding whether or not, “higher education [is] preparing college graduates for the workforce.”[33]

Reaction against online and competency-based education continues, with many questioning the quality of educational experience, the academic rigor,[34] and the replacement of critical thinking and engagement with easy credential acquisition. Much of this reaction is directed at for-profit colleges and universities.[35] Regardless of the intentions of online degree programs and the businesses that partner with them, the costs and benefits to the students are going to be closely watched. Even the practical aspects of how such education to workforce partnerships will operate are being intensely scrutinized. Starbucks and Arizona State University learned this the hard way when the promised free education was found to have upfront costs and quite a lot of fine print.[36]

So where does higher education go from here? The economic realities appear bleak even with a great number of people and interest groups in agreement and a variety of people approaching the problem with the best of intentions. Institutional subsidies, including tax revenues, faculty grants, alumni donations, and money generated from investing large endowments, can all help decrease the cost of higher education, but few institutions enjoy a large measure of them all. The $10K traditional college degree is higher education’s MacGuffin, a seductive, yet seemingly unobtainable ideal that isn’t being considered as a practical goal, but is, at least, performing the duties of driving innovation in higher education and questioning the sanctity of the status quo. It’s moving the story along by providing a plot. Until higher education revolution is possible, it is necessary to focus on higher education reform. I suggest using the above as a basic blueprint. ❑
ENDNOTES

1. The “MacGuffin” is a term created by Alfred Hitchcock that, “helped him assert that his films were in fact not what they on the surface seemed to be about.” As he explained to Truffaut: “You may be wondering where the term originated. It might be a Scottish name, taken from a story about two men in a train. One man says, ‘What’s that package up there in the baggage rack?’ And the other answers, ‘Oh, that’s a MacGuffin.’ The first one asks, ‘What’s a MacGuffin?’ ‘Well,’ the other man says, ‘it’s an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands. The first man says, ‘But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands,’ and the other one answers, ‘Well then, that’s no MacGuffin!’ So you see that a MacGuffin is actually nothing at all. The MacGuffin is simply the device that gets the action going, . . . [it is] whatever it is that the characters in the film are searching for. The exact details, though, are inconsequential for the director.” Gottlieb, “Early Hitchcock: The German Influence,” in Framing Hitchcock: Selected Essays from the Hitchcock Annual, pp. 47-48.


3. Fine, How to Be Accepted by the College of Your Choice.


5. “Who Pays for Higher Education? Changing Patterns in Cost, Price, and Subsidies.” Important, within this study is the distinction between price (costs covered by tuition), cost (amount spent per student), and subsidy (difference between cost and price which is covered by state funding, gifts, donations, and endowments).


7. “Statement on Faculty Workload with Interpretive Comments,” in AAUP Policies and Reports.

8. Suttle, “The Average Yearly Income for College Professors.” The estimated average salary is $74,360, but I round up to $100,000 to include benefits.

9. The same year that the new $46 million fitness center opened at Virginia Commonwealth University, including the oft-vilified rock-climbing wall, four full-size basketball courts, and an aquatic center, tuition and fees jumped 24 percent. See Scott, “Climbing Walls and College Costs.”


11. The latest numbers show that less than 50 percent of all employees within the university have primary roles in teaching, including those that are part-time. Thus, the role of faculty is not merely diminishing in importance within academe, it is structurally diminished. See Desrochers and Kirshstein, “Labor Intensive or Labor Expensive? Changing Staffing and Compensation Patterns in Higher Education.”

12. Lewin, “Student Debt Grows Faster at Universities with Highest-Paid Leaders, Study Finds.”


14. Ibid.


16. Ibid.


19. Vedder, Matgouranis, and Robe, in, “Faculty Productivity and Costs at the University of Texas at Austin: A Preliminary Analysis,” suggest that increased teaching loads do not adversely affect the research and grant-attainment of faculty, though the report’s suggested increases kept teaching loads within the AAUP preferred category at 2/2.

20. Ibid., p. 15.


22. This scholarship’s benefits to students increase in questionability when you consider the increased attrition rate of transfer students and the negative socio-economic impact of the socially perceived inferior quality of education at community colleges (Alisa Nagler engages in a fantastic and thorough review of the relevant literature: “The Influences of Institutional Reputation on the Labor Market Outcomes of Education and Training: A Case Study of Community College Nursing Programs.”) See also Hrabe, “Harvard University or Community College? Why the Choice Isn’t as Crazy as It Sounds.” Also consider the importance of the Greek system at the University of Alabama and the resultant impact of UA’s Greek system in Alabamian politics (which will be denied to students who enter as juniors), and the limit of four semesters of support without a concurrent promise that the four semesters of classes will transfer as classes rather as general credit.

23. Lewin, “Taking More Seats on Campus, Foreigners Also Pay the Freight.”


25. Recently four faculty members led by Kathleen Cawsey of Dalhousie University applied (together) for the soon-to-be-vacated position of their institution’s president. They stated that the university would benefit from getting increased human resources that would better fulfill the requirements of the position and each of them would receive substantial pay raises, even with each receiving only one-quarter the salary. This “serious joke” prompted a number of other foursomes to apply for the position in a statement of defiance against the pay inequality and the current resource-allocation in higher education. See Schuman, “The Clever Stunt Four Professors Just Pulled to Expose the Outrageous Pay Gap in America.”


27. Vedder, Matgouranis, and Robe come to similar conclusions (using subsidies to bring teaching loads down) and have a multiplier of 2.12, or a total loaded cost of $200,208 to support each full-time tenure-track faculty.

28. Parr, “Not Staying the Course.”

29. Haber, “MOOC Attrition Rates—Running the Numbers.”

30. “First Nationally Available $10,000 Bachelor’s Degree to Be Launched by College for America.”

31. Harvin, “SNHU Offers First Nationally Available $10,000 Bachelor’s Degree.”

32. According to a Gallup and Lumina survey, 96 percent of academic leaders strongly agreed that colleges were preparing students for the workforce whereas only 11 percent of employers strongly agreed.

33. To be fair, American higher education has seen rampant grade inflation since the 1960s, with “A” being given 43 percent of the time and “D” and “F” together being given less than 10 percent of all letter grades. The entire system is declining in academic rigor. See Rojstaczer and Healy, “Where A Is Ordinary: The Evolution of American College and University Grading, 1940-2009.”

34. Matloff, “Dumbed-Down Math and Other Perils of Online College.”


36. Pyke, “Critics Warn Starbucks Employees to Read the Fine Print of New Tuition Plan.”
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Teaching as an Act of Problem-Posing: A Collective Call to Action

by Sarah Cacicio and Uyen Uyen Le

Problem-posing education bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality, thereby responding to the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation.¹

Without a doubt, the movement toward corporatized, standardized, and even sanitized education models in K-12 education impacts the way students at the higher education level view teaching and learning. New York City public school teachers have been trained to focus entirely on measurable outcomes. Writing is taught as a well-structured paragraph with an introductory sentence, three supporting details, and summarizing conclusion as opposed to a platform for communicating important thoughts and ideas. Learning has become a product, rather than process for students and teachers alike.² I have come to believe that my City University of New York students’ experience as pre-service and in-service teachers in an outcomes-oriented schooling environment, where they seemingly have no say, directly impacts their experience as learners in my graduate classroom.³

This realization called me to action; I resolved to design a midterm project that would engage students in a real, meaningful process of inquiry and creative transformation. The goal was to reinvigorate learning as a process of question-

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Uyen Uyen Le is a licensed English language arts teacher in a New York City public middle school. Her bilingual and bicultural background in Vietnamese led her to pursue a master’s degree in TESOL at Hunter College, City University of New York.
ing that leads to change in knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and even attitudes. I approached this project with the understanding that change unfolds slowly and over time, but has a lasting impression on how students (and in this case, teachers) think and act. I hoped the assignment would motivate K-12 teachers to take back their profession as educators rather than deliverers of pre-packaged, scripted, Common Core-aligned curriculum.

The following article examines the learning process involved in designing, assigning, and inevitably, assessing the problems posed by the midterm project. In an effort to promote learning and writing as a social practice, I asked one of my students, Uyen Uyen Le, to document her experience and co-write this piece, and she accepted with enthusiasm. Uyen’s story is essential in reevaluating how higher educators define, promote, and measure student learning in the context of corporate-based K-12 education models.

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The current context of teacher education: what happened to learning?

The 2001 reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, commonly known as No Child Left Behind, remapped the landscape for K-12 public education in the U.S., creating a national industry of standards-based curriculum and assessments. The legislation mandates that all schools and districts measure and report their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for all students. Nevertheless it was up to individual states to define AYP and to create an evaluation model for measuring outcomes. New York responded to federal mandates using a backward-design approach, starting with the implementation of high-stakes assessments to determine AYP, followed by the movement toward statewide curriculum standards now known as the NYS P-12 Common Core Learning Standards. During the last 10 years, statewide English language arts and math assessments have been used to determine both grade promotion and teacher effectiveness. As education historian and activist Diane Ravitch notes, the movement toward standards stimulated the creation of for-profit vendors for public curriculum and assessments. Districts began to purchase pre-fabricated, one-size-fits-all curriculum resources and assessment tools. Over time, instructional models grew to resemble corporate business models, with schools and teachers fighting to achieve the highest outcomes for their students.
In September 2012, I was hired as an adjunct lecturer to teach Foundations of Bilingual Education at The Hunter College School of Education, City University of New York. During my first semester, I received a standing ovation for what could be described as an extempore, Freire-inspired speech on teaching as a political act. As I recall, it ended with me yelling “Don’t get angry, get informed!” to a room full of first-year bilingual teachers, most of whom had been advised by their school administration to use English-only practices for bilingual content-area instruction. At that time, I believed that research-based teaching practices could trump top-down state curriculum standards. However, in less than two years, the standards movement greatly impacted the experience of public school teachers, and consequently, my role as a teacher educator. We now find ourselves caught between teaching as a political act and teaching as an act of alignment.

Effective spring 2014, all K-12 teacher candidates in New York are required to take and pass the edTPA, a performance-based teacher assessment. Given that the majority of my students are pre-service bilingual and TESOL [Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages] teachers, I am required to align my curriculum to the edTPA, addressing the five dimensions of teaching: planning, instruction, assessment, analysis of teacher effectiveness, and academic language development. Supporters of the edTPA believe that it will improve teacher education.7 As Sawchuk poignantly notes, however, debates around the edTPA “illuminate a long-standing tension within teacher preparation: whether there is a core body of knowledge and skills every preparation program should convey—or whether, as proponents of ‘critical pedagogy’ theory assert, a program’s primary duty is to help candidates question traditional education policies and structures that purportedly contribute to inequities.”8 In addition to aligning my syllabus to the edTPA, I am also responsible for assigning key assessments—faculty-developed assignments that use the same rubrics and weighting across all course sections—plus submitting student work samples and performance scores at the end of each semester. Many of the key assessments require pre-service teachers and in-service teachers to create and carry out Common Core-aligned lesson plans. While I value setting clear, high expectations for teachers-in-training, I still believe it is my obligation as an educator to uproot the status quo.
LEARNING OBJECTIVE: CREATE YOUR OWN LEARNING OBJECTIVE

For the midterm, I asked students to create and present a spoken, visual, or written essay, reflecting on their understanding of any new concept or idea related to our field of bilingual education. There was no required format apart from a list of works cited. I explained that it was necessary to look closely at one particular concept or idea to see, reflect on, and articulate an understanding of the larger socio-cultural, historical, political, and academic forces that have shaped the broader concept of bilingual education and, in turn, their experience as teachers. The idea for the project was based on Ambrose’s assertion that how students organize knowledge influences how they learn and apply what they know—how those pieces are arranged and connected in an individual’s mind. I encouraged my students to dis-assemble all of the parts and reassemble them in a way that made sense to their own experience and understanding. I wanted them to generate ideas about bilingual education. Nevertheless as I described this deconstructive/constructive process, my students grew visibly frustrated. Inevitably, one student raised her
hand and asked, “but how will you grade us?” I came to understand that my students expect absolute clarity when it comes to assessment and resist the nebulous, difficult, often painful experience of learning, that is, actively generating new ideas.

Hansen states that ideas remain ideas only if they are dynamic and subject to change. When they harden or become routine, as all too many do, they lose their vitality and take on the passive aspect of facts and information.10 I envisioned my students exploring freely and directing their own learning, but in reality, the lack of guidelines frustrated them. They demanded clearer examples and descriptions. They preferred facts and information.

The collective resistance to the midterm project seemed to affirm the need for its existence. We started over. This time, I provided class time for my students to generate ideas by reflecting on their own life experiences as bilingual individuals, and drawing deeper connections to the literature. I agreed to share the work of a former student who had explored the concept of “codeswitching,” a common practice of using two languages simultaneously. To make visible the negative connotations often associated with codeswitching, the student had created a brochure for the “treatment” of codeswitching. She used research to support that codeswitching is actually a sign of mastery of two languages, and that misconceptions stem from deep social and power relations.11

Seeing a sample allowed them to better grasp the purpose of the project. Slowly they stopped asking for explicit guidelines and started to follow their own questioning. I received countless e-mails from students telling me about their ideas and requesting feedback—we were finally collaborating! When it came time to present the projects, it was amazing to observe how the creative and reflective process had unfolded and informed their thinking. For two class sessions, I listened, observed, and learned from my students’ perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of foundational concepts in bilingual education. None of the learning interactions were clearly measurable, and yet the outcomes far exceeded the expectations I could have set. One student in particular exemplified the process of inquiry and creative transformation, pushing us to see the relationship between language, identity, and history in a completely new light.

In an exploration of “language shift,” Uyen Uyen Le created and presented a timeline that traced the language practices of her family over the course of four generations. It started with the story of Uyen’s grandparents who spoke French in Vietnam and ended remarkably with the developing language practices of Uyen’s
own son who she considered at risk for losing his heritage language. When Uyen presented her timeline to the class, the room fell speechless. She had taught us to look at the concept of language shift through her lens as a first-generation Vietnamese-American. Through hearing Uyen’s experience, we were all reminded why this work matters; we learned to see how language shift impacts the lives and experiences of our first- and second-generation students here in New York City. But how did Uyen come to reflect on and teach us about language shift? What learning process did she undergo to generate such original and profound ideas? I felt this was something I needed to understand more clearly as a teacher. The fol-

When we requested more detailed guidelines, Sarah said we were free to create our own, but she would not revise the assignment. Near mutiny ensued.

owing section illustrates the midterm reflection process from Uyen’s point of view.

ENGAGING IN INQUIRY AND CREATIVE TRANSFORMATION: UYEN UYEN LE’S STORY

As an 8th-grade teacher in a New York City public school, I value creative thinking from my students, yet I am often surprised and disappointed when they push back. It was not until I encountered Sarah’s midterm reflection assignment that I understood the origin of their resistance. The assignment, probably not much different from the open-ended projects I prefer to assign to my own 8th grade students, created anxiety for my classmates and me. The assignment description was brief and frustratingly vague, although I did appreciate the power to choose my own topic. Immediately, I knew I wanted to explore the idea of language shift, which can be defined as the loss of language through economic, political, cultural, social, and technological change. I felt such a personal connection to this concept and decided to create a family tree to illustrate how language shift had occurred in my family from Vietnam to the U.S.

As a first-generation Vietnamese-American, my language identity has been a source of both embarrassment and pride, owing to both external and internal factors. The theory of language shift seemed to be able to help me understand these conflicting feelings. Once I started arranging my family tree, however, I realized it was an insufficient and superficial representation of what happened. It didn’t tell the whole story, I thought. Then I got stuck. I got frustrated. I considered abandoning my idea to write an essay instead, but for reasons I cannot articulate, I kept going.

It seemed that my classmates had also reached similar impasses with their own projects. We spent a good portion of one class trying to figure out more precisely what Sarah wanted from us. When we requested more detailed guidelines, Sarah
said we were free to create our own, but she would not revise the assignment. Near mutiny ensued; and the anxiety and the confusion around the project were palpable. We asked to see past projects, and she reluctantly showed us a brochure on codeswitching that helped to an extent. Sarah explained the rationale behind not showing us past projects—that seeing others’ work might inhibit our own thinking. Sarah wanted blue-sky thinking, creative, critical, and uninhibited.

I returned to my family tree, disheartened that I would have to abandon this topic because I would not be able to do it justice. On top of this, I had spoken to a classmate who told me she was also planning on using a family tree to illustrate language loss in her family. This bothered me; I was not thinking blue sky. I was trapped under a blanket of clouds. Finally, I decided to e-mail Sarah about my idea. She encouraged me to continue with my thinking, writing:

"You will be able to discuss inter-generational language shift as well as factors that affect these changes, such as occupation, violence, and immigration. Further, it is so important for us, as educators of minoritized language populations, to understand our own history and relationship to language, albeit complicated and often painful. I encourage you to explore your past, present, and future understanding of language, and how this exploration affects your role as a teacher of language-minoritized youth."¹³

I realized that I was going in the right direction, but these words confirmed that I would need to recalibrate the way I was thinking about language shift.

I continued with the family tree, but started to see that there was so much more to the picture than language shift within my family. I referred to Sarah’s e-mail not as a checklist, but as a reminder that I was exploring something much bigger than my experience and the experience of my family. My family tree turned into a personal timeline, then a family timeline, and ultimately, a collective historical timeline. I spent time with my mother on the phone, asking her questions I might never have asked. I spent more time researching the complicated history of colonial Vietnam. The amount of actual time it took to create the timeline was not substantial, but I did spend a lot of time thinking, refining, and transforming my ideas. What started as a basic understanding and interpretation of language shift quickly became a creative, transformative process that has since informed my teaching philosophy and pedagogical practices.

Freire summarizes the process of transformation that I underwent in complet-
ing this project, writing:

[A]'s [students] are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, [they] will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge. Because they apprehend the challenge as interrelated to other problems within a total context, not as a theoretical question, the resulting comprehension tends to be increasingly critical and thus constantly less alienated. Their response to the challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understanding; and gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed.¹⁴

Digging further into family history has helped me consider how to approach teaching English to language-minoritized youth. Wherever possible, my goal is to dig deeper into my students’ family histories as a means to examine the greater sociopolitical context of their language learning. I want to work to understand how their own language histories and identities have shaped their attitudes, and those of their parents, towards learning language and encourage them to take ownership of their affiliations “with a different language community.”¹⁵ English is the language of schooling and, therefore, the language of power. Choice has everything to do with power and I want to give my students as much choice as I can to empower them and to motivate them intrinsically.

MEASURING OUTCOMES OF INQUIRY AND CREATIVE TRANSFORMATION

Uyen’s final project is a testament to the fact that problem-posing education can and does produce real, measurable, and significant learning outcomes. In this case, the end results did align with the initial goals of the assignment. By looking closely at one particular theory or concept, Uyen and her teaching colleagues learned to question and generate ideas about the larger sociocultural, historical, political, and academic forces that have shaped bilingual education. My students experienced firsthand the profound impact of inquiry-based learning even at the graduate school level.

As Uyen and I can attest, there is no place more important than teacher education programs for inquiry-based learning. If teacher education programs perpetuate product-based demonstrations as knowledge, teachers will in turn, continue to value and promote standardized assessment-based practices. However, if pre-service and in-service teachers are engaged in critical pedagogical practices, they will learn to value and promote learning as an active process in their own classrooms.

As Hansen, poignantly states, it is indispensable for educators to grasp fully why ideas differ from facts and information. If they do not do so, they will have no intellectual basis upon which to criticize curriculum and assessment policies that privilege the mastery of fact over the development of genuine thinking.¹⁶ As higher educators, it is imperative that we consider the outsourcing of the nation’s curriculum and the movement toward standardization as a threat to the process of learning, and to the generation of new ideas. Teaching is indeed a political act; it is the vocation of breaking down and challenging policies that perpetuate inequality in and outside of the classroom. At every level, teaching is the act of posing real
problems in a way that stimulates not only reflection, but also action upon reality. Learning is a dynamic, active, transformative process that cannot be contained, packaged, delivered or commodified. Market-based education reformers cannot put a price on the generation of ideas for generations to come. My fellow educators and I will make sure of it.

ENDNOTES
1. Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, p. 84.
2. Ambrose, How Learning Works: Seven Research Based Principles for Smart Teaching, p. 2. As an example of how sanitized education has become, note that it is now common practice for elementary-aged students in New York City to keep their grade-level texts in a Ziploc bag.
3. Pre-service refers to the education and training provided to student teachers before they have undertaken any teaching, while in-service refers to those already employed as teachers.
5. Note that New York City Department of Education Chancellor Carmen Fariña took a step toward lessening the consequences of high-stakes tests on April 9, 2014, by announcing that grade promotion would no longer be determined primarily by student performance in standardized state exams. The change reflects Mayor Bill de Blasio’s administrations first attempts to follow through on promises to lessen reliance in city schools on state exams.
7. It is important to note that the edTPA has been opposed by CUNY’s faculty union, the Professional Staff Congress; United University Professions, the union of State University of New York faculty and staff; and New York State United Teachers (NYSUT). NYSUT reached an agreement with the N.Y. State Education Department to delay full implementation of the edTPA until June 30, 2015 (http://psc-cuny.org).
8. Sawchuk, “Performance-Based Test for Teachers Rolls Out.”
13. The authors use the term “minoritized” to reflect languages that lose value or prestige as they come into contact with more dominant languages and cultures. We reject the term “minority” to describe languages and their respective speakers.

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King, K. and L. Fogle. 2006) “Raising Bilingual Children: Common Parental Concerns and

New York City Department of Education. 2014. *Chancellor Fariña Announces New Promotion Policy For Students in Grades 3-8*.


Serving on committees is, of course, one of the duties expected of a tenured professor. For me, one of these assignments entailed an examination of the core curriculum for undergraduates at my small, liberal arts college in New Hampshire, part of the periodic review process. The committee members agreed to label the result the “Liberal Arts Core Curriculum,” or LCC, for short. No one thought either the name or the acronym would be offensive, but they did not anticipate the degree to which the political polarization of the country has infused the same antipathy into higher education.

A faculty member in the political science department subsequently objected, not to the curriculum’s designation but to the acronym that omitted the word “Arts.” According to his reasoning, LCC signified a political agenda, deriving from a bias toward a leftist philosophy, thereby failing in the institution’s goal of educating—not indoctrinating—undergraduates. The lacuna, so the argument went, concomitantly labeled more conservative students as somehow being beyond the pale and incapable of redemption in a classroom that focused exclusively on the opposite end of the political spectrum.

The episode prompted me to wonder, again, how the word “liberal” has become a pejorative in our political and educational lexicon. I am, sadly, accus-
tomed to dealing with such matters, and these interactions always take me back to Cardinal Henry Newman’s thoughtful exposition on the idea of higher education.

**FROM ANCIENT GREECE TO CARDINAL NEWMAN: THE MEANING OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

Newman stressed the importance of “enlarg[ing] the range of studies” available to students, because although “they cannot pursue every subject which is open to them, they will be the gainer by living among those and under those who represent the whole circle.” In the process, students learn mutual respect in what Newman called “a pure and clear atmosphere of thought.” That is, the student is immersed in an intellectual tradition that “is independent of particular teachers.”

I would add independent of political ideology as well.

Institutions of higher learning are, therefore, charged with creating an atmosphere in which the student “apprehends the great outlines of knowledge, the principles on which it rests, the scale of its parts, its lights and its shades, its great points and its little.” And, most important, Newman reminds us that the nature of this education is purposely called “liberal,” and produces “[a] habit of mind ... formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are, freedom, equableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom.”

Etymologically speaking, Newman is on point; “liberal,” of course, derives from the Latin *liber*, meaning “free,” and describes a mind unencumbered by either prejudice or indoctrination. Extending the discussion, we could then ask what specific courses would produce the liberal mind to which Newman alludes? Liberal arts, of course, a brief history of which is relevant to contemporary issues.

In ancient Greece, the term pertained to an education that enabled a Greek citizen to participate in the business of the *polis*. To guarantee effective participation in civic life, formal study had as its primary goal the production of an educated, virtuous citizen. To that end, the focus was on grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Today, by comparison, one often hears complaints about students’ difficulties in all three fields and the relatively shallow learning and profound ignorance displayed by American citizens in general. Studies show, for example, that only 79 percent are aware that the Earth orbits the Sun, and barely 76 percent know that this country achieved its independence from England. Existing in such an epistemological desert would have disqualified similarly limited Athenians from adding a well-informed voice to civic discussion.
Moving into the Middle Ages, the liberal arts were expanded. The three original subjects from antiquity were christened the Trivium, and four more subjects (the Quadrivium) were subsequently added: arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. As humanity’s knowledge base expanded, more subjects found their way into the curriculum until a contemporary description of liberal arts includes all subjects not pertaining to professional, vocational, or technical curricula. And therein lies the rub.

The exclusion of these pursuits, that is, any educational system that does not base its core curriculum on, and have as its primary goal, making money appears to be the major point of contention with some faculty and many students in today’s colleges and universities. This sort of identity politics, as Alan Ryan points out, “degenerates into a grinding exercise in denying an advantage to the other side, no matter what the long-term damage to yourself might be.” So intense is the disagreement between the two factions, that the adjective “liberal” has become, at least in some circles, synonymous with anti-capitalism, anti-business, and therefore anti-American.

The growing emphasis on financial success as the singular goal of higher education, exemplified by the rise in for-profit colleges run on business models, as well as business-friendly “competency-based” institutions, has created a disturbing pattern. Many institutions of higher learning now sacrifice qualified administrators who do not demonstrate sufficient prowess or innovation when it comes to increasing the university’s bottom line. The University of Virginia recently dismissed its president because board members did not think she was sufficiently attentive to the university’s financial position. Responding to Virginia’s action, an assistant professor at the university observed, “Universities are not corporations. Universities are nonprofit, public entities that have missions of teaching, research, and public service. Those are not the same mission as a corporation.” In a similar move, Purdue University installed a new president, a former governor with no academic experience, who is, however, adept at raising money and reducing spending for education.

This debate between a purely academic versus a profit-driven philosophy also threatens the boots on the ground, the faculty who are charged with educating the young men and women in their classrooms. More and more frequently, even at my liberal arts college, I encounter students who categorically deny any advantage of a liberal arts curriculum. These entrenched preconceptions, often inherited from...
parents whose understandable objective is their child’s financial independence, are extremely resistant to either modification or moderation. I continue to encounter students who openly denigrate any coursework that does not, in their view, contribute to an increase in income, confirming Tony Judt’s observation: “[T]he thrall in which an ideology holds a people is best measured by their collective inability to imagine alternatives.”

Such a mercenary attitude promotes disinterested participation in the classroom of, say, a writing course, one that develops organizational and critical thinking skills and will clearly benefit anyone, regardless of major. This pervasive insistence on a business-oriented, vocational approach to higher education drives the current prejudice against anything that remotely detracts from that goal, often, as Judt said, to the point of emphasizing trivial disagreements and jeopardizing valuable programs.

This sneering condescension whenever a “liberal” curriculum is discussed, whether top-down or bottom-up, clearly creates a distraction from the goal of producing a well-informed citizen. I have never lost faith that a liberal education remains the most effective method for producing an intellect both broad and deep, which in turn will result in better educated citizens who at least have a sense of history and science to guide their professional and personal decisions. Peter Winch puts it this way: “[T]o study another way of life is necessarily to seek to extend our own—not simply to bring the other way within the already existing boundaries of our own.”

RECLAIMING THE TRUE MEANING OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

How, then, can a “liberal core curriculum” be construed as either biased or politically insensitive? Only by insisting on a perversion of the term as understood through 2,500 years of tradition and application. A liberal education, free of the distortions advanced by reactionary politics, undertakes to produce a mind informed by “moderation and wisdom,” a mind immune to the scandals and drama of 24-hour news cycles, a mind capable of identifying fact from fiction, truth from deception. The implications for a representative democracy are obvious and, contrary to popular myth, do not exclude the ability to earn a comfortable living.

Without such an education, the republic will be forced to contend with an electorate unfamiliar with substantive issues, voters who rely on personalities, half-truths, and innuendo, and succumb to a confirmation bias that treats views

I have never lost faith that a liberal education remains the most effective method for producing an intellect both broad and deep.
congruent with theirs as revealed truth without examination or question, and
dismisses out of hand anything that conflicts with those preconceptions. That is,
Americans might be able to distinguish between macro- and microeconomics but
will persist in picking their elected representatives in the same manner they choose
their breakfast cereal and select school board members, university presidents, and
faculty based on an ideological litmus test.

If the antidote to this gloomy state of affairs is a liberal education, then it
beggars belief that any educated person would possibly object to the inferences
attached to such a respected and august concept. A liberal mind, informed by a
liberal education, is not the enemy of any specific political party, entity, or eco-
nomic system. It is one that searches for the truth and tests the validity of any
proposition. It encourages experimentation, introspection, and the thoughtful and
respectful exchange of ideas.

A “Liberal Core Curriculum” therefore remains the proper vehicle for achiev-
ing higher education’s charge to make our young men and women better citizens.
The misapprehension of the term by few should not relieve the academy of its
obligation to keep alive a tradition that has flourished for over two millennia
and brought human development to the pinnacle it now occupies. Jeff Lustig, in
this journal, described the result if the liberal arts were supplanted with a more
curriculum more limited in scope and philosophy: “The liberal arts could not
be jettisoned from the university and its autonomy lost without changing what
the institution fundamentally is.”13 The risks are simply too great to allow Adam
Smith’s invisible hand to be the exclusive determinant in educational choices.14

The NEA and all faculty must speak with one voice to preserve our educa-
tional heritage, manage our curricula, resist the pernicious influence of corporate
largesse, and insist that higher education be entrusted to the men and women
dedicated to an inclusive worldview that does not evaluate an individual’s merit
based on a balance sheet or projected earnings. We must continue to encourage a
mutual respect that can come, as James Axtell insists, “only when people learn to
regard all other human beings, singly and in groups, as both different from and
equal to themselves to understand them as much as possible in their own terms”
(emphasis in original).15 That is the ultimate purpose, and a heroic one, of a truly
liberal education.

ENDNOTES
2. Ibid.
3. Trivium Education.
5. Ibid.
6. The contemporary description of liberal arts includes history, moral philosophy or ethics, and
   the natural sciences.
8. Sampson, “College Boards Turn to Business-Style Approaches.” Note: UVA’s President Sullivan subsequently was rehired after faculty and student protest.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.


14. In The Wealth of Nations (1776), Smith elaborated his concept of the invisible hand of a free-market economy, reasoning that society would benefit most, including in unintended ways, by market forces unencumbered by government oversight or intervention. Applying that same rationale—which has proven to be fallacious—to higher education would eliminate any curricula that did not comport with an unrestrained pursuit of profit.


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Economies of Scale and Large Classes

by Martin Saiz

Making classes larger saves money—and public universities across the country have found it a useful strategy to balance their budgets after decades of state funding cuts and increases to infrastructure costs.

Where I teach, in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences at California State University, Northridge (CSUN), student to faculty ratios have increased by 25 percent since 2008. Across CSUN, those ratios have increased 11.5 percent since 2000, and beyond our campus, across all 23 universities of the CSU system, they increased by 9.5 percent between 2007 and 2011.

While these larger classes have helped provide fiscal stability and flexibility to CSUN, the benefits have not been distributed equally among the stakeholders in the university. Administrators may capture the economies of increasing returns to scale, and this strategy may work for them and their budgets, but it also exposes where power lies within the university. Larger class sizes and higher student to faculty ratios provide large benefits to administrators; some benefits to faculty; but only few, if any, benefits to students.

This trend and its consequences for students are not specific to CSUN, nor the large public institutions of California, but are symptomatic of the changes occurring in higher education across the nation.

Learning from Budweiser: Making Efficient Containers for Education

Considered in terms of production, higher education is not much different.
from other industries. Concentrating a lot of activity in a small area generates efficiencies. In a single day, in one facility, students attend classes in a variety of disciplines, collaborate with peers, eat, study, and exercise. Administrators, staff, and faculty do much the same. This concentration of activity generates more than convenience and sharing—it permits economies of scale. To serve each student costs less when more is done for many in close proximity. In just a few years, our students can amass a number of courses across multiple disciplines to claim a liberal college education—a wide range of understanding about the world, as well as in-depth knowledge about a specific field of study.

*Education has much in common with brewing and bottling, industries where containers are a significant cost. In education, the container is the classroom.*

In some cases universities can take advantage of increasing returns to scale (a special case of economies of scale). Here, education has much in common with brewing and bottling, industries where containers are a significant cost. By analogy, in higher education, the container is the classroom. Assuming the classroom is square, the output is roughly proportional to the square of the length of its sides. If a room has a capacity of 40 students, the maximum yearly output will be limited by the number of times the university can use that classroom annually. The inputs (drywall, plaster, steel, etc.) depend on the length of the classroom perimeter. More specifically, a 50 by 50 foot classroom with a capacity of 40 requires 200 linear feet of wall, while a 50 by 100 foot classroom with a capacity of 80 students requires only 300 linear feet of wall to give the same amount of space per student. Similarly, a 100 by 100 foot classroom will accommodate 160 students with only 400 linear feet of built wall. The ratio of students to walls for the three examples are five feet of wall per student for the 40 student classroom, 3.75 feet of wall for the 80 student classroom, and 2.5 feet of wall per student for the 160 student classroom. Each time we double the number of students we only need to increase the size of our container by two-thirds. Because over a semester’s time the number of students served depends on the combined length of walls of the classrooms, larger classrooms generate increasing economies of scale and reduce per-student costs.

Before 2000, CSUN had only two rooms with capacities of more than 100. Since then, the university has built six additional large-capacity rooms; increasing the university’s large classroom capacity by 1,293 seats. This represents a capacity of 30,360 students per semester in large lecture halls! In the meantime, in some other classrooms, separating walls have been torn down, turning small rooms into larger rooms, and increasing their capacities from 40 to 80.
Other economies of scale associated with larger class sizes are even more impressive. A double-sized “smart” classroom needs only one computer, projector, monitor, screen, and data port, instead of the two required for two single-sized classrooms. Most importantly, a double-size classroom has only one instructor. Because each room is used for multiple classes per day, an institution like CSUN can save more than $100,000 per semester in faculty salaries across the life of each doubled classroom. If all of our classrooms were doubled, CSUN also could eliminate half the classroom computers, projectors, monitors, screens, data ports, and faculty and still produce the same outputs. Theoretically, a university could increase its returns to scale until classrooms reach the size of stadiums. Only issues of congestion and demand may limit the university’s ability to lower costs this way. Consequently, administrators tend to increase class sizes during times of fiscal stress.

SURVIVING LARGER CLASSES: WHAT FACULTY DO

You would think that professors would howl at the prospect of having more students in their classes. In fact, most faculty in my department have not complained until recently. Our department and others in our college embraced large classes, especially when they came with reductions in course loads. Our dean, being a clever administrator, offered a valuable incentive to any faculty member willing to teach large classes. Classes with enrollments larger than 120 students would count for two classes (or six teaching units). Those with enrollments larger than 180 would count for three (nine units) and any class above 220 would cover one faculty member’s entire required teaching load of four classes (12 units) per semester. The capacities of large classrooms vary across campus, but the effective ratio of students to teaching units was about 20:1, or about 60 students per three units. For comparison, the average class of 40 students comes with a teaching credit of three units or a ratio of students to teaching units of about 13:1. For faculty teaching in the large classrooms, our dean effectively increased the student to faculty workload ratios by about 65 percent.

Faculty in the Political Science department rationalized that by delivering introductory courses for non-majors in large classes we could lavish attention on our majors in smaller classes. In the first years faculty were offered student assistants in the large sections to help with administrative tasks like proctoring exams,
taking attendance, running exam forms, and recording grades. Unfortunately, the
funding for student assistants lasted only two years and this year the number of
units faculty receive for the very large classrooms was dropped from 12 to nine,
raising the ratio of students to teaching units to about 26:1 or about 78 students
per three units. Our dean has effectively increased faculty workload by 100 percent
in the largest classrooms. Still, some faculty covet the opportunity to teach the
large classes. Why?

Again, the reasons have to do with increasing returns to scale. To prepare
a lecture for 100 or 200 students takes no longer than to prepare one for 10.

Our dean has effectively increased faculty workload by 100 percent in the largest classrooms. Still, some faculty covet the opportunity to teach large classes.

Similarly, to write an exam or prepare a syllabus for a big class takes no longer
than to do the same for a small one. Additional students may even help class
dynamics if they ask good questions or offer helpful comments. Some adjustments
need to be made; mostly in lecturing style. Teaching large classes requires more
performance with exaggerated vocal inflections and gestures. Developing a series
of media clips and learning a few jokes also helps. Of course, students can be dis-
ruptive and ask silly questions, and the more students there are in a class, the more
likely it is that a few of them will be.

But not all things come with economies of scale; some tasks require individual
attention. Most obviously, the time it takes to grade student performance increases
proportionately with the number of students enrolled in each class. Some assess-
ment tools like multiple choice exams take only minutes, if scored by machine,
but essay questions need to be deciphered individually by hand (or eye and mind).
Indeed, as the examples below show, writing assignments of almost any length are
impossible in large classes.

Two classes I have taught recently illustrate the dramatic effect that assign-
ments and grading have on workload. My class with 231 students had no writing
assignments while the one with 43 students had a series of weekly essays for the
students to write and for me to grade. Even with more than five times the num-
ber of students, the large class was actually less work. The large class involved
developing and giving 27 lectures, and writing and grading 27 daily quizzes,
two midterms, and a final exam. Other tasks included meeting individually with
students and answering their emails. My smaller class, which was classified as an
upper-division general education course, required that I assign writing amounting
to a minimum of 2,500 words per student. Over the semester, this equals about 10
pages of writing per student (double-spaced with citations and references) or about
430 pages of grading for me, not including the required re-writes and re-grading
as per university standards. I believe that short assignments develop better writing skills so I spread the 2,500 words across 13 weekly assignments of 200 words each. Grading is tedious labor so I do not dwell on these essays. I spend about five minutes on each: reading, correcting grammar and spelling, checking documentation, assessing the substantive content, writing a few comments, and determining the grade. Even this cursory effort adds up to about four hours per week, again, not including re-writes and re-grading. Add in three hours per week of in-class teaching and about one hour for everything else (class preparation, writing and grading quizzes and exams, and answering emails), and the total reaches eight hours per week for this one small class. If I added this modest writing requirement to my large class, the workload would increase proportionately. I would have to grade about 575,000 words.

To be clear, I do not consider the writing requirement unreasonable for small classes and the 43 students I have in the smaller class seems to be the limit for a single class. I also believe that it is critical that we develop the writing abilities of our students. Many faculty members find it impossible to teach meaningful classes without including writing assignments, and feel that not doing so would undermine the discipline and their sense of professionalism. Still, I also have colleagues who are assigned 80 student classes with the same 2,500-words-per-student writing requirements and are only given credit for teaching one class. This increases their workload by about 50 percent. Thus, I am grateful to be assigned a large class where teaching writing is considered impossible, or at least too onerous. This gives me license to take advantage of economies of scale and some time to devote to my research and service responsibilities. In sum, large classes are not a problem per se from the perspective of many instructors. Workload depends as much on how much attention is required for each student as well as the numbers in each class.

**The Benefits of Class Sizes for Students: What the Evidence Tells Us**

Students, on the other hand, get few advantages from large classes. They may gain opportunities to learn from the few truly brilliant professors, and the presence of other students listening silently to a lecture doesn’t detract from their learning in the same room. Of course, distractions caused by cellphones or from students multitasking on laptops increase with the size of the class. Over the past few years, more students seem to feel free to come to class late and leave early, and students
distract themselves by texting or surfing (on the Internet) during class; all these things are easier to get away with in large classes. And, while a professor can police students’ distracting behavior, controlling disturbances is itself a distraction that increases with size. Other “benefits” to students are dubious from an educational standpoint: not having to speak up or write papers; the increased likelihood of having close friends in class; and the opportunity to remain anonymous and free ride on the efforts of others.

Students benefit more from smaller classes. Large classes have less class time per student—more students means more questions and answering more questions takes time away from presentations. Students may also be reluctant to ask questions in big settings and less time is available per student for discussions. Because the professor’s voice is the only one amplified in a large class, students may not able to hear the questions asked by other students and often do not fully understand the answer given in class. Instructors also have less time per student during office hours.

These observations are reinforced by copious amounts of empirical evidence that suggests that large classes are characterized by:

- increased reliance on lectures as a method of instruction;  
- less instructor-student interaction;  
- less student involvement in classes;  
- less feedback from faculty;  
- reduced breadth and depth in course assignments, assessments, and writing assignments;  
- reduced student satisfaction with larger classes;  
- lower attendance;  
- less civility;  
- more cheating;  
- declining student evaluations of professors;  
- significant negative correlations between class size and grades;  
- higher drop-out rates; and  
- decreased student learning.

The most important research question asks if lower grades or less learning is associated with larger classes — and often, the answer has been yes.

From 1989, when Hopkins and Hahn found that students enrolled in smaller sec-
tions had higher GPAs, to 2001, when Keil and Partell found that the probability of a freshman receiving an A in a small class at Binghamton University was 2.4 times higher than their peer enrolled in a much larger lecture class, the evidence is clear. In 2012, my colleague at CSUN, Bettina Huber, found that GPAs decrease as class sizes increase. In particular, sections with more than 50 students “appear to be particularly deleterious for students enrolled in lower-division classes.”

This point about lower-division classes is particularly important, as we know that more than half of all students who withdraw from college do so in their first year, when they are most likely to be enrolled in classes of 100 or more stu-

In particular, sessions with more than 50 students “appear to be particularly deleterious for students in lower-division classes.”

... students. At CSUN, the numbers confirm that first- and second-year students are being herded into large classes. In the College of Social and Behavioral Science, the increases in lower division classes have been dramatic—from an already high 50.4 students per class, on average, in 2008, to 69.9 students in 2012. Meanwhile, over the same period, CSUN’s College of Business and Economics increased their lower division classes from 44.9 to 56 students. Campuswide, average student-to-faculty ratios in lower division classes are almost twice as large as those for upper division classes, and about 4.5 times bigger than graduate courses. This is particularly unfortunate because an increasing number of students entering CSUN lack sufficient skills in reading, writing, and mathematics, and need individualized attention to diagnose and overcome these deficits.

But perhaps the most convincing evidence around the power of small class sizes comes from a large five-year study in a leading university in the United Kingdom following several years of budget cuts and corresponding increases in class sizes. Academic achievement was measured by observing student performance on year-end exams. The sample covered 10,873 students enrolled full-time between 1999 and 2004 in 626 different courses in 23 academic departments offering 125 degree programs. The large sample allowed researchers to compare the same student’s performance across large and small classes for a total of 40,851 observations. They were also able to control for a wide range of student and faculty effects. Class size did not vary with measures of student wealth or other demographic characteristics. They observed the same faculty member teaching different class sizes and found no evidence that departments assigned faculty of differing quality to different class sizes. In the end they found that, all else being equal, effect of class size on student performance was negative; students do worse in bigger classes.
CONCLUSION: MORE EDUCATIONAL BOTTLING?

After decades of effort around college access, the U.S. does see more students going to college, but now the attention of policymakers is shifting to other metrics of progress, like retention and graduation rates. The research reviewed above shows that these are adversely affected by larger class sizes. More troubling is a recent study that concluded that most college graduates are learning little during their years in college. This study assessed the education, using a standard measure of learning, over a four-year period for several thousand students in more than two dozen institutions.28 The researchers found that after two years in college almost 50 percent of students could not demonstrate any gain in critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing, and more than one third could not show any improvement after four years. They also found that many college courses lacked rigor: specifically, during a given semester, one third of students did not have a course requiring them to read more than 40 pages per week and half had no course that required more than 20 pages of writing. Time spent studying has dropped by 50 percent since 1960.

I find this study distressing, but I must admit its findings don’t surprise me. My workload, as measured by the number of students I teach, has increased incrementally for 22 years. The fall semester of 2012, when I was assigned 267 students in three classes, was the high point (or low point, depending on one’s perspective). Every increase in the number of students in my classes requires that I must cut back the number, length, and rigor of assignments—otherwise, I couldn’t possibly keep up with the grading. My supervisors understand this and allow me to make such adjustments based on the size of my classes. When our department expressed concern over the rising class sizes coexisting with intensive writing requirements, our associate dean told us that we were spending too much time correcting our students’ writing. No wonder students show little improvement in higher-level skills such as critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing.

For students, larger classes seem to offer little. But if administrators are rewarded for employing economies of scale, we are likely to see more of the same. Indeed, instituting massive online courses becomes even more tempting because they do not require sizable capital expenditures and class sizes can be almost limitless. Of course, access to the institution has little meaning if the quality of education is poor.

ENDNOTES

1. B. Huber, “CSUN by the Numbers.”
2. California Faculty Association, “Summary of Changes in CSU Student to Faculty Ratios: 2007 to 2011.”
3. Large lecture hall capacity is assumed at full capacity, eight times per day for Monday through Thursday schedules, four times per day Fridays and Saturdays.
4. Calculation based on part-time faculty cost of $5,000 per three-unit class (2012 dollars). Classroom use is assumed at eight times per day for Monday through Thursday schedules, four
times per day Fridays and Saturdays.


10. J. L. Ratcliff, “What They Took and What They Learned.”


12. W. McKeachie, “Class Size, Large Classes, and Multiple Sections”; and E. Carbone and J. Greenberg, “Teaching Large Classes.”


15. M. D. Sorcinelli, “Dealing With Troublesome Behaviors in the Classroom,” in Handbook of College Teaching: Theory and Application; M. D. Sorcinelli, “Promoting Civility in Large Classes”; and M. J. Weimer, Teaching Large Classes Well: New Directions for Teaching and Learning, no. 32.


17. J. L. Franklin and M. Theall, “Grade Inflation and Student Ratings: A Closer Look.”


21. B. Huber, “Do the Average Grades Awarded in the Undergraduate Class Sections Offered at Cal State Northridge Vary by Section Size?” p. 2.


24. B.Huber, “CSUN by the Numbers.”

25. Ibid.


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