

How Do We Stop It? Strategies for Pushing Back Corporate U.

by David Bordelon

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, even from within the academy itself.¹

The response of academics generally takes two paths: indignation or resignation. Just read the online comments after one of Thomas Friedman's op-ed takedowns of higher education, "Revolution Hits the Universities," or the latest *Chronicle of Higher Education* effusion patiently explaining how "How Disruption Can Help Colleges Thrive," to see the richness and depth of academics' critique of flawed arguments.² The problem is we're fighting a rearguard battle, trying to argue rationally where an ideology of "business first" already has been established. And with papers to grade, research to complete, and articles to write, we end up complaining to each other in the hallways, sighing and shrugging, and then getting back to the real work of academia. In the meantime, "it" rolls on, powered by 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.³

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.

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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.⁴ 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."⁵ 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?"⁶ 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 stu-

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dents 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.”⁸ 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.”⁹ 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.”¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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.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 *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* and a *Pseudomonas fluorescens*? Or sit in an office patiently explaining why a more specific example from *The Things They Carried* is needed to show that it is really

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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.

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."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, resisting the pressure for efficiency dictated by the marketplace, is not a simple transaction. Learning is a complicated mental and physical process involving information, demonstration of skills, feedback, persistence, assessment, and mental change, most of which is intangible. No matter how hard businesses try, it cannot be placed in a shopping bag or online cart. Yes, it can be paid for, but that still doesn't make students customers. Instead it signals a desire on the part of students to enter the world of academics, a place where the "customer" is explicitly not always right. Indeed, that realization is an important part of the learning process.

And realistically, do students really want to be treated like customers by their professors? Do they want a "would you like fries with that?" mentality governing their education? To reduce students to customers is to reduce education to a cash

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 edu-

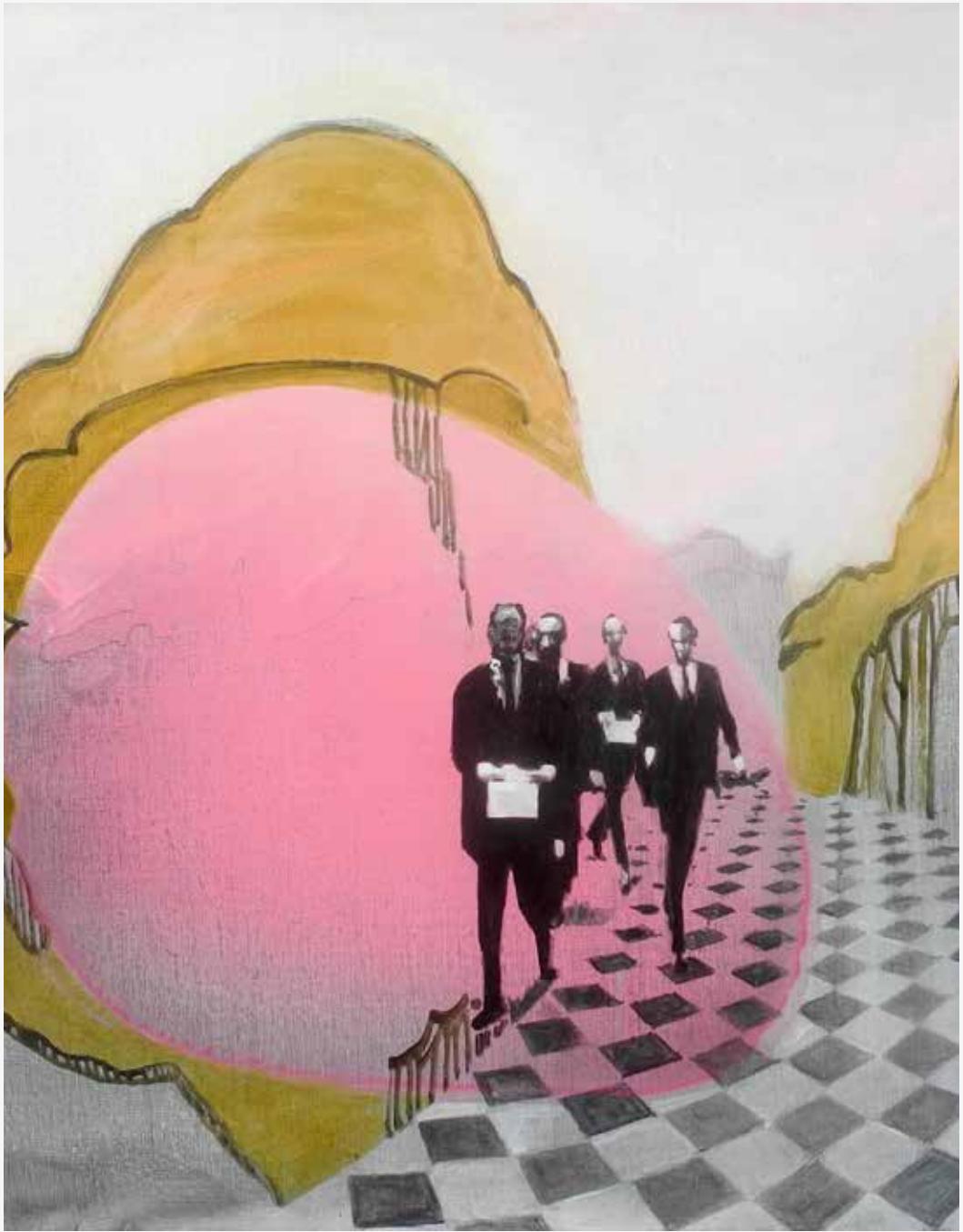
The hope of entrepreneurs is that education can be commodified and packaged into an online pellet, much like Willy Wonka’s dream of a meal in a pill.

cation 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.¹⁵ A market cycle is created when these “products” are then proselytized in advertisements masquerading as scholarship.¹⁶ 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."¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

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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.²⁰

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.²¹ 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."²² 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.²³ 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.²⁴ 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

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rigorous education.²⁵

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 American 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.”²⁶ In the same year, a Gallup survey on confidence found that “Big Business” could only muster a 19 percent approval rating.²⁷ 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

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Full time. Part time. Profit motive.*

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.

D E T E R M I N A T I O N

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 number 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

1. Cf. “A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education,” a report from the Bush administration’s Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, 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.
5. Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*, p. 145.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
7. Selingo, *College Unbound: The Future of Higher Education and What It Means for Students*.
8. Noam Chomsky, “How Higher Education Ought to Be: On Academic Labor.”
9. *Ibid.*
10. “Revolution Hits the Universities.” *New York Times*.
11. Selingo, *College Unbound*.
12. Rice, “Anatomy of a Campus Coup.” After pressure from both within and without the university, they rehired her.
13. Straumsheim, “Confirming the MOOC Myth.”
14. “W. Va. Higher Ed Plan Emphasizes Students As Customers, State’s Economy,” *Community College Week*.
15. Pianko and Jarrett, “Early Days of a Growing Trend: Nonprofit/For-Profit Academic 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.”
21. Rice, “Anatomy of a Campus Coup.”
22. Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty*.
23. Marcus, “New Analysis Shows Problematic Boom In Higher Ed Administrators.”
24. “Trends Table,” Resources on Contingent Appointments, *American Association of University Professors*.
25. For a review of the literature on the effectiveness of part time teachers, see Ochoa “Contingent Faculty: Helping Or Harming Students?”
26. “Lumina Foundation/Gallup Poll 2011 Higher Education,” *Gallup*.
27. “Confidence in Institutions,” *Gallup*.
28. Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*.
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*.
31. Rice, “Anatomy of a Campus Coup.”
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.”
33. Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience,” p. 234.

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