

THE BEST OF TIMES, THE WORST OF TIMES: AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

by Henry Lee Allen

What happens to American higher education in the 21st century is an urgent, momentous question of overwhelming magnitude and significance for this nation and societies around the globe. Indeed, one could make the case that the future of the world hinges on the ongoing welfare of American higher education.¹ Higher education represents this nation's greatest intangible legacy; no other society in the history of the world has ever established a system of postsecondary education as large, productive, and diverse as ours. Elites from across the world migrate to these shores to capture the knowledge of American colleges and universities. Immigrants from everywhere have improved their chances in life by seizing the opportunities afforded by this nation's academic enterprise.

I love American higher education, for I think that it represents this nation's greatest social enterprise. Coming from disadvantaged social origins myself, I find the life of higher education has greatly enriched my being and inoculated me from the most insidious, banal aspects of capitalism. As an African-American growing up during the 1960s, I, with others of my generation, can

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never forget that higher education equipped Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. with the robust intellect needed to assault the juggernaut of racism. Nor can we forget that higher education helped produce and equip those scientists responsible for landing a human on the moon.

Since the founding of Harvard University in 1636, this nation has depended on the men and women who labor at colleges and universities to educate its leaders. Higher education has been a principal means of social mobility for many, acculturating immigrants, empowering minorities, and providing the opportunities women have needed to seek liberation from discrimination.

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I am grateful to this higher education system for allowing me the knowledge, opportunity, and social contacts to move from the ignorance, poverty, and illiteracy of a disadvantaged community to the apex of the academic professions. Through American higher education, I have lived a better life than any of my ancestors could have ever dreamed of. I want that same

quality of life to be accessible to all who desire the treasures of learning.

This is not to say that the record of higher education is perfect; nor do I mean to suggest that the academic community has always been in the vanguard of social justice. But I think that colleges and universities have been the main citadels for the open expression of the best ideas that humankind has ever produced. The institutions have been in the vanguard of civic freedom within a capitalist society where a predilection for commodities often dictates far too many cultural pursuits.

Over the past several months, I have read several key monographs that have examined social patterns in the United States. One of these, Jacques Barzun's massive text, *From Dawn to Decadence*,² an epic cultural history of western civilization from 1500-2000, suggests that western culture is in a state of decadence, our society inundated by the facile values and vulgar sensibilities of popular culture.³ Much of this decadence is driven by commercial imperatives rather than the best ideas and practices of western civilization, notes Barzun. Yet, as I read, I was struck again and again by how colleges and universities have been instrumental in promulgating the central ideas of our times—from Socrates to the Renaissance to the Reformation to the Enlightenment to the Space Age to the Internet.

My fascination with Barzun's ideas have rekindled my concern about the fate of higher education. I ask myself "where are we, the entire aca-

demic community—faculty, administrators, staff, trustees, benefactors and students—headed in the 21st century? Will we experience the worst of times like those who were victims of the *Titanic*? Or are we headed to the best of times like those embodied in the mythological fictions of *Star Trek*?

There are several ominous signs on the horizon. Sociologists since Emile Durkheim have realized that you cannot divorce changes in the academic division of labor from those affecting the overall division of labor in society. In a very insightful book, *Corporation Nation*, Charles Derber argues that corporate power has increasingly constrained the power of citizens to improve their lives.⁴ Derber observes:

There are now some 44,000 transnational corporations; their share of the world gross product has risen from 17 percent in the mid-1960s to about 33 percent in 1995. Among the thousands of transnational companies, the top 200 account for most of the action. These corporations enjoy greater combined annual revenue than the total income of 4.5 billion people in the world, more than four-fifths of the world's population. The combined income of the top 200 is \$7.1 trillion, which is greater than the combined economy of 182 countries.⁵

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Where else, but in higher education, are you likely to find the scholars to expose such a staggering concentration of wealth? Social inequality is not a pleasant topic for business leaders and politicians elected to preserve the social order. Few social institutions—except colleges and universities—have the cultural jurisdiction or intellectual authority to expose such hidden or inconvenient facts in a way that matters or prompts concerted, reflexive action.

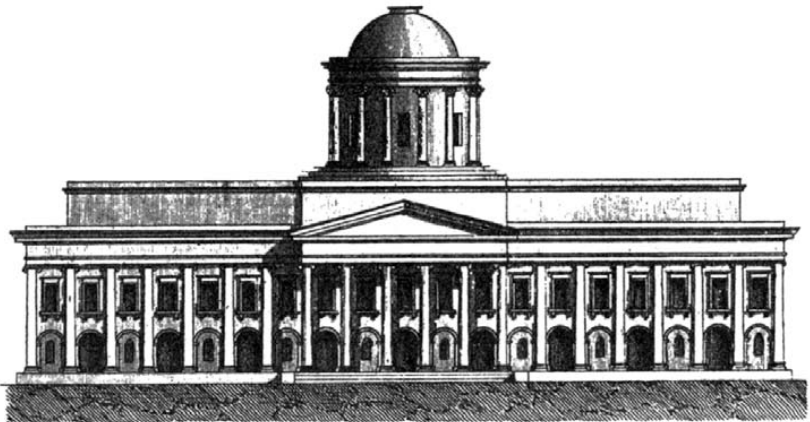
Which other occupations or professions, other than the academy, would allow its incumbents to research these insights? The freedom to explore and publish neglected topics that threaten powerful interests—without reprisal—is really what esoteric, legal, and ideological battles over academic freedom and tenure are all about. From the days of Socrates, Luther, and other reformers, until the civil rights movement of our own times, universities and colleges have been sanctuaries for the radical ideas that foster social reforms.⁶

Reforms speak loudest when they address the needs of those who

labor tenaciously for the means of survival. Work, quality higher education, and reform may be just the political prescription needed for the next wave of social progress. Surely, it will take acumen to decipher the issues, elaborate a counter-agenda, and marshal resources as citizens to make this society live up to its full democratic potential.

To name one significant example, contingency work is spreading like a ferocious cancer. Across many of this nation's industrial and occupational sectors, employers have made a deliberate policy decision to hire temporary or part-time workers to avoid paying fringe benefits and full-time wages. Gone is the implicit social contract between faithful workers and corporate managers. Dissent is not tolerated because employers have the option of relocating to more receptive or responsive locales. Indeed, risk is the new nomenclature of the workplace. Richard Sennett describes these trends quite well in his 1998 book, *The Corrosion of Character*. Professor Sennett documents how deskilling, market transformations, and technological developments have changed the character of the workplace in the United States. Looking at similar evidence, Jeremy Rifkin has even wondered about the end of work.⁷

What have these observations to do with higher education? Let me suggest that: (1) the growing decadence of popular culture, (2) the concentration of corporate wealth, and (3) the marginalization of labor affect our endeavors in colleges and universities—if not directly, then surely, indirectly. What poisons the atmosphere will eventually invade



the inhabitants' lives—unless those who will soon be affected by this danger take adequate precautions. Quite frankly, the decadence of popular culture—if unabated—may ultimately undermine our nation's traditional respect for the uniqueness of academic work.⁸ We have all heard and read where many taxpaying citizens wonder why college and university professors should have special tenure rights in an era when most workers cannot even count on steady employment. In my own publications, I have consistently tried to answer this skeptical audience.⁹ As I have shown elsewhere, much of the cited evidence against tenure is anecdotal or specious, yet I also suspect that popular culture may now be less willing than ever to recognize the historic cultural authority of the academic world.¹⁰

Since it is unlikely that corporations will begin criticizing their own accumulation of wealth, it is left to colleges and universities to act as the main social institutions for social criticism and dissent, on

the one hand. On the other hand, higher education is dependent on these same corporate and political leaders for funding. It is hard to bite the hand that feeds you if you need funds to finance your regular teaching, research, and other activities.

The verdict is still out on the implications of part-time faculty and non-instructional staff, but I conjecture that they face many of the same workplace pressures as laborers in other industries. Part-time faculty and non-instructional staff need equitable salaries, fringe benefits, and respectable working conditions just like many full-time faculty have. To bring this about, we must work together to enhance the quality and productivity of the colleges and universities we represent. In *United Mind Workers*, Professor Charles Kerchner urges all knowledge workers to be sensitive to the productivity concerns and accountability dictates of an insecure public who find themselves working in precarious labor markets.

Given these background realities, I envision four possible scenarios for the academic professions. I have categorized these as: (1) the **doomsday** scenario, (2) the **optimistic** scenario, (3) the **incremental** scenario, and (4) the **contingent** scenario.

The **doomsday** scenario is consistent with the framework developed by Jeremy Rifkin in his chilling book, *The End of Work*.¹¹ Rifkin has chronicled how unabated trends in technological advances could desta-

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bilize occupational structures worldwide, leading to massive unemployment and underemployment. If this scenario unfolds as anticipated, most professors are destined to be victimized by the forces of technological displacement. Information technologies will gradually erode the need for traditional faculty in the 21st century as the information superhighway rolls like an avalanche over the academy. In short, the bulk of the academic professions will have gone the way of the dinosaurs, replaced by virtual universities, distance education, and winner-take-all market forces.¹²

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Where doomsday conditions prevail, faculty work has been restructured to be more perfunctory and more routinized as academic work—especially teaching—has been deskilled. Faculty concerns recede within academic organizations, becoming more and more marginal to the overall educational enterprise. Institutional policy tendencies that naively favor performance measurement have the potential

to encircle the faculty role within an iron cage of surveillance. Quantitative measures of academic productivity become the bottom-line for much of postsecondary education beyond research universities, doctoral institutions, and elite liberal arts colleges. Issues of quality, diversity, and equity become less important to the public agenda as cost containment, consumerism, and certification hold sway. Authoritarian managerial tactics are used to circumvent or suppress collegiality to the extent that education is viewed as a cheap commodity. Under this scenario, the academic professions are dethroned from the kingdom of knowledge by a coup of market forces and slick operators.

Worst yet, the emerging postindustrial society—that is to be ruled supposedly by technocratic, symbolic analysts—evolves as a credential society, where superficial credentials are the tools for social mobility. Technological applications suitable to mass consumer markets are inevitably biased toward quantitative dimensions: They regress to the mean or lowest common denominator. Where quantity obscures quality in educational technologies, too, academic competencies and sensibilities can likewise be replaced by a thin veneer of popular expertise or gadgets. Should present technological trends accelerate even faster during the next few decades as faculty members retire—along with conditions of worldwide economic stringency, this doomsday scenario is at least plausible.

The **optimistic** scenario for the academic professions is counterintuitive, deduced in part from Michio Kaku's enchanting book *Visions*.¹³ Kaku, a theoretical physicist at the City University of New York, describes how and why the coalescence of the computer, biotechnological, and quantum revolutions could permit humankind to build a global society in which disease, ignorance, and vice have been curtailed in unprecedented ways. Advances in artificial intelligence, robotics, and space technologies should allow societies to invest their collective time and energies in more enriching pursuits as well as more productive leisure activities.

Under this scenario, the academic professions could be reborn. This optimistic scenario would require a massive increase in educational opportunities worldwide as international agencies and governments rediscover academic systems as the most cost effective means to national development. Once again, investments

in human capital become a global priority. Kaku foresees a world where the very worst inequalities have been undermined by scientific and technological advancements so compelling that oligarchic interests have been nullified by science. If this scenario unfolds the way Kaku depicts it, professors must prepare themselves for the greatest expansion of the academic professions ever known, as a global populace becomes the classroom of the next century. Would not this be a pleasant surprise since the market for ignorance has a much greater supply curve than the market for material goods?

Much more likely is the **incremental** scenario in which things continue more or less as they are in the near future. Assuredly, politicians are unlikely to set grandiose visions where revenue streams are tenuous. However, an unexpected seed of hope can emerge from time to time, much like President Clinton's tuition tax credits in higher education. Then the other side of the coin, retrenchment, remains an ever-present threat as political and economic cycles oscillate. The main variable in this incremental scenario is the ratio of revenues to costs. Lessons from the restructuring and retrenchment episodes of the early 1990s indicate that the greater the revenues available to academic institutions or departments as opposed to costs, the better the climate in higher education; conversely, the greater the costs against revenues, the more precarious the viability of the academic enterprise.¹⁴ As institutional or organizational

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survival becomes problematic, tenure becomes somewhat more at risk—suggesting limited tenure as the model of the distant future.

To the extent that the academy is content to muddle through ecological changes in a reactive rather than proactive fashion, current attacks on tenure will continue. In the same way that responding to inclement weather forecasts can save needless loss to life and property, the proactive strategies of the academic professions can avoid the most cataclysmic

effects of external threats. Undoubtedly, the more advantaged academic organizations will prosper under the incremental scenario, while most institutions will become more and more marginal to the mainstream—as the cancer of mediocrity spreads. To move beyond the immediate perils and parameters of incremental change, professors must construct realistic and effective organizational solutions to the ubiquitous productivity problems that are endemic to most academic organizations in

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every generation—so much more so as the pace of technological change accelerates.

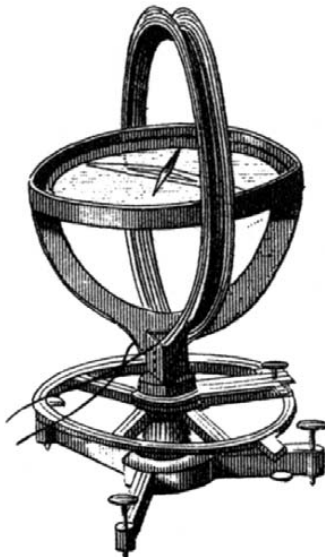
The **contingent** scenario links the fate of the academic professions to the social relations among intraorganizational as well as interorganizational coalitions of power.¹⁵ Power coalitions consist of social networks or groups composed of actors who have decided to cooperate in such a fashion as to further their interests through collective action. Whether elitist or pluralist in origin, these power coalitions influence a range of resources, opportunities, expertise, contacts, and policy matters within higher education. Power coalitions involve the exercise of symbolic, economic, political, and moral power via influence and authority. Under certain conditions, such coalitions are even able to transcend traditional party biases to achieve strategic ends. Thus, the contingent scenario implies that the future of higher education remains contingent on whether leaders within the academic professions are adept at establishing viable power coalitions throughout the infrastructure of global civilization.

Dominant and subordinant coalitions pervade the academic and social landscape of this society, as sociologists constantly remind us. Coalitions having interests favorable to the academic enterprise could expand the jurisdictions of the academic professions—especially if these

interests are institutionalized in an enduring political movement. On the other hand, power coalitions with myopic interests that are diametrically opposed to increasing access and affordability within higher education might steer public policies away from this investment. Partisanship is not the issue. Competent policies can be promulgated by unions and professional associations acting in coalitions at various levels on common interests, despite the specter of the law of unintended consequences.

For far too long, the academic professions have failed to coordinate their common interests, allowing the fortunes of faculty to rise and fall according to the whims of popular stereotypes. The future of the academic professions within democratic societies is a function of how we market ourselves in a rapidly changing marketplace of public opinion. Juxtaposed between order and chaos, that future is not fixed, guaranteed, or stable. Rather, it is constructed by the decisions made by social actors in each generation within the academic enterprise as well as society. A contingent scenario recognizes that the future of higher education must be renegotiated by successive generations. Since no one can predict a priori what the future holds in the absence of systematic, meticulous knowledge about the attitudes and interpretations of current and future citizens, the academy can never tire of justifying its existence to its benefactors.

Whatever the road ahead, wisdom dictates that the collective academic professions remain eternally vigilant. Anti-intellectualism, like prejudice and discrimination, cannot be eliminated by fiat. Ignorance is a perennial foe. Public opinion can be quickly altered by events beyond the control of the most alert institutions, the most diligent



disciplines—as recent decades have demonstrated. Faculty must organize themselves to vigorously contest those political and economic interests that aim to marginalize us. For some faculty, this means formal organization via unionization; for others, it suggests interdisciplinary interaction via informal coordination at the institutional or associational levels.

Professors must act in concert in the 21st century if they are to counteract the organized, jingoistic agendas of policy thinktanks that ignore or undercut our legitimate interests. Given that a divided house of faculty cannot expect to endure the onslaughts of adversaries or calamities, academic professionals have no option but to network together to seize our tactical advantages in markets of expertise. While not craving undue hegemony, faculty must cooperate intraorganizationally and interorganizationally to develop intellectual properties under our auspices that are at the forefront of our respective disciplines. It would be foolhardy for us—the original producers of expertise markets—to abandon our ecological niche to misguided forces that merely supplant or reproduce perfunctory insights via gadgets and technologies that are only instrumental to the academic enterprise.

Under the contingent scenario, our collective responses and efforts shall influence whether the 21st century will lean toward the best or worst of times for the academic professions. Transitions and conditions aside, faculty in this new century have no choice but to win the incessant war against ignorance, obliterating false notions, stereotypes, and caricatures which impinge on the sanctity of our craft. Our future emerges from what we do, from how we unite to accentuate our common educational interests. Surely those of us who have helped to shape the best features of human civilization cannot let the noblest ideals of the academy atrophy.

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ENDNOTES

¹ F. T. Rhodes, *The Creation of the Future*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001.

² J. Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence*. New York: Harper Collins, 2000.

³ Similar notions are advanced in Charles Derber's book, *The Wilding of America*, 2nd ed. New York: Worth, 2002.

⁴ For similar sentiments written much earlier, see James S. Coleman. *The Asymmetric Society*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982.

⁵ Charles Derber, *Corporation Nation*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000, 273-274.

⁶ Undoubtedly, unions like the National Education Association have also promoted social reforms.

⁷ J. Rifkin, *The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era*. New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1995.

⁸ J. Fairweather, *Faculty Work and Public Trust*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1996.

- ⁹ H.L. Allen, "Workload and Productivity in an Era of Performance Measures," *NEA* 1999.
- ¹⁰ J. Fairweather, *Faculty Work and Public Trust*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1996.
- ¹¹ Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work*. Tarcher/Putnam, 1995.
- ¹² Robert H. Frank and Philip J. Cook, *The Winner-Take-All Society*. New York: Free Press, 1995.
- ¹³ Michio Kaku, *Visions*. New York: Anchor, 1997.
- ¹⁴ H.L. Allen, "Workload and Productivity in an Era of Performance Measures," *NEA* 1999.
- ¹⁵ Richard H. Hall, *Organizations*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1999.

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