

Futuristic Education

Beyond the Modern University: Toward a Constructive Postmodern University

by Marcus Peter Ford. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002

Reviewed by Barbara Beigun Kaplan

In this provocative book, author Marcus Peter Ford warns that “the world is on the verge of an ecological and social catastrophe...virtually unimaginable in its scope,” and nothing short of a total restructuring of the modern university will rectify the situation. To this end, Ford maintains that the only proper goal of institutions of higher education should be to make the world a better place “by enabling human beings to live more meaningful and satisfying lives and by helping to promote social justice and environmental sustainability.”

But this primary objective will never be achieved, he argues, as long as institutions of higher education remain tied to their current educational methodology—focused on the acquisition of job-related skills and characterized by intellectual and moral relativism—and their traditional administrative structure—based on largely independent academic units with each discipline having its own foundational principles and its own notions of reality.

Ford offers a new structural model for higher education that would provide students an awareness of the value of all things in nature and an appreciation of the complexity of interrelationships that affect life on Earth. He insists that the modern university abandon its attachment to philosophical materialism and “economism”—the faith that infinite economic growth is both possible and desirable—maxims prevalent in today’s society. His restructured “postmodern” university would eliminate the artificial boundaries separating disciplines, promote problem-based learning, directly embrace the teaching of human values, and provide students

opportunities to engage in projects and activities that address regional and global issues.

In Ford's restructured institution, classes would be team-taught by faculty with expertise in different fields, and students would develop a substantial foundation in metaphysics—ideally based on a “process philosophy,” such as that of Alfred North Whitehead, that emphasizes objective values and affirms relationality and experience. The faculty role would become one of mentor. The university would be smaller, more regional in focus, and would focus on giving students a broad knowledge of the world and of their own community.

The university would commit itself to producing environmentally aware citizens rather than providing training for employment. Students would need to acquire job-related skills not at college but after graduation, most likely in training centers run by various businesses. Although Ford admits that one cannot determine in advance the costs of running such a restructured university, he asserts that there would be cost savings in streamlining the curriculum: vast library holdings would not be necessary and expensive scientific labs need not be maintained. The money saved would enable universities to support a smaller faculty with increased duties to provide students individual mentoring.

There is adequate precedent for the university to restructure itself and to change the fundamental premises on which it operates, Ford insists. He supports his argument with a short summary of the history of the university, using three prototypes—the University of Paris (with its emphasis on theology and its ties to the Church), the University of Halle (an example of an institution dedicated to affirming national identity), and the University of Phoenix (representing institutions responsive to modern day economic trends and workforce needs). He maintains that even without compelling external reasons for change, the modern university still must restructure itself because it lacks internal intellectual coherence when it tries to balance traditional “elitist” notions of the value of abstract scholarship with practical vocational goals. Universities cannot sustain this conflicted sense of purpose for long, Ford argues, and the restructuring he envisions will restore clarity and consistency to its operations.

The curriculum in Ford's plan would consist of courses on the state of the world, contemporary social issues, and local social and environmental issues, as well as courses on Western civilization and successful non-traditional sustainable cultures and community development, and would include individual research/activist projects. These interdisciplinary courses would be supplemented with study of economics, writing, math, and the fine arts.

Few would argue the desirability of promoting environmental sustainability and social justice that the author sees as essential to averting

global catastrophe. Nor could anyone argue the utility of increasing student awareness of global and regional issues. Even Ford's depiction of the modern university as philosophically torn between promoting knowledge for its own sake and providing practical, marketable skills is essentially accurate.

One must question, however, the practicality of adopting the model Ford offers as his solution. Even if this model could be implemented, would institutions of higher education have sufficient authority in today's society to operate as the effective change agents that Ford envisions? Could the university restructure itself in ways so contrary to powerful external demands and still attract sufficient students to remain solvent?


Ford hinges his arguments for institutional reconstruction on the fact that universities have altered their operating principles in the past. There is clear evidence that universities can, and do, change. But even Ford's own historical review reveals that universities have typically responded to, rather than initiated, the worldviews that have informed their curricular transformation.

Ford laments the increasing influence of corporations on modern universities and the "vocational" focus that has resulted from this influence. But given the reality of this influence, along with what might be characterized as a culturally induced impatience toward acquisition of useful information and "skill sets," it would seem that prospective students seeking the services of higher education would most likely gravitate to institutions that could provide them marketable credentials rather than broad-based insights into the human condition. Should the university deliberately abandon the utilitarian learning outcomes desired by students and the society at large, many students would simply opt out of attending college altogether and move directly into the work world (or enroll in business-run training programs which provide little or no exposure to other subjects at all). The result would be a population even more lacking in a holistic perspective on the world and the environment than at present.

Ford insists that a piecemeal approach is inadequate to solve the current "crisis." Yet, given that universities are unlikely to embrace the holistic restructuring he envisions, an evolutionary model should be considered. In fact, much is already happening in higher education to enhance the existing structure so as to promote much the same kind of social awareness that Ford desires. Service learning is becoming more common on campuses—even being elevated to a graduation requirement at some schools. Increased attention is being given to providing an array of co-curricular activities, including internships, field study, community-based leadership projects, and study abroad. In the Maryland, for example, all public institutions of higher education are required to address "Emerging

Issues" in their core curriculum. The boundaries between a number of academic disciplines have already begun to erode as a result of new conceptualizations and theories. Team-teaching by instructors in different fields is no longer a rarity on many campuses. A number of schools have successfully integrated problem-based learning into their courses. Educational associations, like the Carnegie Foundation, are strongly promoting integrative learning, and many colleges are listening. Faculty development initiatives on many campuses promote interdisciplinary dialogue and also support faculty research on and assessment of strategies to maximize student learning outcomes. All these initiatives are integrated into an existing curriculum that still includes specialized skill building in the various disciplines. Even if the amalgam created may not be wholly internally consistent, its various elements taken together can prepare students to both better know their world and to still become marketable, employable citizens in it.

Will a more gradual evolution of the curriculum be enough to heighten students' awareness of environmental matters and check the "ecological and social catastrophe" of which Ford speaks? There is no guarantee. But given the choice between building upon what universities are already doing to respond to the needs identified by society at large and a more radical restructuring that might be viewed as irrelevant or even counter cultural, it would appear that gradual curriculum change may be the only pragmatic option available.

Regardless of the concerns that can be raised about Ford's solution, he has articulately highlighted the need for society to foster a more environmentally conscious and morally defensible worldview as a corrective to the excesses of materialism and individual self-interest. His vision of a better world is powerful—we just need a more practical means of getting there. 

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