

Distinguishing a University from a Shopping Mall

By Daniel Noah Moses

In January 1991, during the winter break of my senior year at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I went camping in the Adirondacks with my father, my college roommate Kevin, and three of my father's friends. Huddled around the campfire after a long day of cross-country skiing, I was losing myself in daydreams of life after graduation when my father's friend Clyde asked me a question.

"What are you majoring in?"

"History," I told him.

Clyde, an intimidating man under any circumstances, looked at me across the flames.

"What are you going to do with that," he asked me, "open up a history store?"

Two-and-a-half years later, I entered the Ph.D. program in American History at the University of Rochester.

When I started graduate school, I believed that the university was made up of individuals who togeth-

er pursue knowledge and wisdom. Oblivious to job market horror stories, I loved to learn and felt good that the university paid me to learn. I chose the University of Rochester because the chairman of the History Department, Christopher Lasch, was the model of the kind of engaged public intellectual I dreamt of becoming.

Octavio Paz has written that the study of history walks the line between science and poetry—and I wanted to walk that line.¹ To me, history opened up the richness of human experience. To me, history was about possibilities.

More than five years later, I am "A.B.D.," defined by that ugly word, "dissertator."

During my time in Rochester, the university has been in the midst of what's called "The Renaissance Plan." Administrators now consider the university a "service provider" that they want to make more "consumer friendly."

The goal of the top brass is

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clear: to run the university like a corporation, with themselves as managers, faculty and staff as workers, and students as consumers. They want to lead a university that prepares its students only too well for the world outside.

On the surface, my story is just the misadventure of one graduate student in a decaying industrial city on the Erie Canal. But my encounter with university life in the waning days of the 20th Century is part of a larger story worth telling.

It seems silly to point out that the purposes of a university and those of an airport mall are different, and that the University of Rochester is not, by any reasonable definition, an airport mall. Yet, even during my first weeks in graduate school, a peculiar feeling came over me whenever I walked through the student union, Wilson Commons. It was as if I were bidding my time between flights.

No matter how famous the architect who built it—I.M. Pei—no matter how wonderfully the bricks on the external walls change colors as they season, or how nice it is to sit under the glass and watch the sky in winter, there is an awful hollowness about Wilson Commons, with its “Pepsi-Cola Plaza.” The place provokes in me the mad urge to check if my flight is on schedule.

At first, I feared this sense of

dislocation was mine alone. Slowly, though, I came to realize that it was a campus-wide phenomenon, broadly understood—although not as an airport mirage—and pervading every moment. This deadness of Wilson Commons and the University of Rochester produces a stench that travels far beyond the boundaries of this one university, mingling with other unsavory smells like the rotting of community and the decay of democracy.

Christopher Lasch died around Valentines Day in 1994. That same year, Thomas Jackson, a bankruptcy lawyer and former Dean of the University of Virginia Law School, became president of the University of Rochester.

We had the first taste of things to come when, just before winter break in 1994-95, the administration announced it would cut the anthropology graduate program. There was barely a peep from faculty, students, or staff.

I tried to look on the bright side. Our new president wrote his undergraduate thesis at Amherst College about higher education, so I hoped he had some vision. Besides, he and Provost Charles Phelps wrote in a campus periodical that they were “confident an exciting future can be created for our collective selves. To do so requires planning, cooperation, candor, and dedication from all of us.”²

We expected that those who make the big decisions would care enough about us to explain these decisions.

About a year later, as the campus looked forward to Thanksgiving in November 1995, top administrators unveiled the “Renaissance Plan” with great fanfare. As part of the plan, they immediately suspended four graduate programs, “refocused” four others, promised to reduce the undergraduate enrollments by 1,000 students over the next several years, and pledged a renewed emphasis on undergraduate life.

The major reason for the changes, according to Vice-Provost and Dean Richard Aslin, was that “the current balance of revenues and expenditures is unsustainable.” In plain language, the “Renaissance Plan” was about downsizing. Administrators were cutting programs and jobs and inflicting pain. They argued that this pain was necessary and held out some small hope that they had a genuine vision for the role of a university in a democratic society.

My own History Department was among the “refocused.” According to the administration, which had instituted an elaborate method for measuring departmental productivity, the department could not sustain its “ratings” without Lasch. Instead of supporting the department under these circumstances, the administration chose to downsize it.

The administration gave us no assurance they would try to help us through the hard times. When I went to the administration offices to learn more about the rationale behind the “Renaissance Plan,” I was polite. But, when a dean who was once a scholar of religion, heard what kinds of questions I was asking, he ordered me out of the building.

Soon after, several hundred graduate students assembled to meet with President Jackson, Provost Phelps, and Dean Aslin. As members of the university community we wanted to understand, at the very least, the logic of their cuts. We felt it reasonable to expect that those who make the big decisions should care enough about us to explain these decisions, and map out the future and our place in it.

But neither the president nor the provost showed up to meet with us. Their excuses were the sort that get undergraduates in trouble: The president claimed a last-minute engagement. The provost pleaded sudden ill-health. They left Dean Aslin—who stepped down from his post soon after—to take the heat for decisions that were beyond his authority. We never heard from the president or the provost again.

In the autumn of 1996, the administration, still pursuing the Renaissance Plan, overhauled the dining facilities and set up a new

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food court in the Frederick Douglass building. In doing so, they emptied what little life remained in I.M. Pei's Wilson Commons.

Belatedly, after realizing their mistake, the administration floated the idea of building a large atrium between Rush Rhees Library and Wilson Commons and another food court, presumably under the assumption that a student union could be designed more or less like an airport mall.

As the university gouged graduate programs—ostensibly from financial necessity—salaries for top “executives” increased. In 1997, President Jackson made close to \$300,000, a conservative estimate considering the many perks that come with the job.

In the same year, the administration instituted a \$900 “continuation fee” for graduate students studying beyond their fourth year. Administrators know that graduate students struggle financially for degrees with often uncertain economic returns. Most graduate student stipends remain stagnant and far below the administration's own estimate of a living income.

By itself, establishing the “continuation fee,” while raising the President's salary to such heights may be a small thing, but to me it was yet one more example of how little top administrators cared about those they are supposed to

lead, and how well they have greased the wheels of their corporate model.

The contrast between the student union at the University of Rochester and what might be became more vivid when, in the summer of 1997, I returned to Madison to visit my old roommate Kevin, with whom I had gone camping years before. My stay in Madison was centered around the student union, which is filled every day with more life than fills Wilson Commons all year.

“This is what a student union is supposed to be,” I kept thinking. On the second floor of the union, I noticed a plaque honoring Porter Butts, director of the union from its creation in the 1920s until 1968. Experiencing Madison again and reading this plaque reminded me of the possibilities for a university.

I don't mean the University of Rochester can ever be like a university more than four times its size, and the U.W. is far from utopia. But the Midwestern democrats who built the place believed they were creating an institution for citizens of the republic, not shopping mall consumers. There is an ethos in Madison even today that withstands the bottom line.

Porter Butts, for one, had vision. “Only full living induces full learning,” he said. He saw the stu-

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dent union as a central part of the university experience, a place where people could make and appreciate music and art, a place to gather for intense discussion, for casual conversation and spontaneous life, for political debate, club meetings, visiting lectures, holidays, and random events.

Butts wanted a place where students could be confronted with choices, not between burgers or burritos, but between an array of activities that stretch the imagination.

Butts also wanted the student union to reach out to the larger community. He believed that a student union, like the university that hosts it, should encourage dialogue and mutual understanding and the deepest enjoyment of life.

His model for what a university should be was not an airport mall. Instead, he wanted his student union to be a “training ground for good citizenship and self-governance.”

Porter Butts believed in democracy—and he believed in a good time. He wanted to establish a center for democratic living where students could, as he put it, “share in and cope with the pressing problems of the day.”

The University of Rochester’s Wilson Commons, on the other hand, is a monument to today’s pressing problems. It is no accident that it feels like an airport mall.

Airports are where airline corporations provide their services to consumers who want to get from one location to another. Airports almost always have food courts. For airline corporations, it’s easy to distinguish between the product and the consumer.

But it’s not so easy for a university to make that distinction. Where do students fit? Are they consumers buying an education in the same way a consumer buys a burrito or a plane ticket? Or are students merely products that an educational factory manufactures? Are teaching assistants only employees of this educational factory? Or does the corporate metaphor simply not hold?

From the moment that some fiery Calvinists established Harvard College in the 17th century, higher education in the United States has been intertwined with “the powers that be.” But, in the past, business leaders recognized in the university an institution that upheld values far different from any bottom line. This is no longer the case.

Never have corporate values reigned in the United States so supremely as they do today, when an overarching corporate metaphor has invaded all aspects of American society, including academia.

This corporate discourse catego-

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rizes experience according to production, marketing, and consumption. It fits all of us into these categories, restricting our imaginations, constricting personal and institutional relationships, sinking into our language and the substance of our thoughts, diminishing the quality of our existence.

On a certain level, it seems silly to dispute the corporate metaphor. The similarities between a university and any other corporation are obvious. These similarities have always existed, although, as a non-profit, the university has a particular obligation to the common good instead of the bottom line.

But it is one thing to notice similarities and another thing entirely to organize higher education around the corporate metaphor. Obviously, each university must make good business decisions. Yet we do not consume education like we consume burritos and submarine sandwiches. Nor are we ourselves burritos or submarine sandwiches. There are other ways of looking at life, and the metaphors we use do matter.

College graduates go out into the world to make a living. Some achieve their wildest dreams, while others adjust their dreams to smaller sizes. The university should prepare its students to succeed in the careers they choose. Yet

a good liberal arts education and a good university experience is about more than job training. It is portable and durable wealth.

A university education is meant as preparation for life in its fullest sense. It is meant to enrich life in its fullest sense. In a good liberal arts education, students confront the most sublime subversion of their settled assumptions. Such an education should shake things up: Why? How? How could it be? Couldn't it be better? If the United States is to be a good and democratic society, its universities must encourage and foster democracy and a democratic quest for the good life.

This nation is rich in traditions that offer conceptions of the good life that have nothing to do with "consumers" and "products." At the dawn of the 20th century, for instance, American Progressives believed society was becoming affluent enough for citizens to break free of economic want to strive for humane and enlightened goals. For instance, Herbert Croly wrote that "perhaps the greatest benefit which civilization will derive from an improved economic organization is that of enabling good citizens more frequently to forget the economic aspects of life."³

Throughout most of American history, college presidents were moral leaders. They drew their inspiration from the Bible, with its

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visions of justice flowing like water, of lions and lambs lying down together, of Saul killing the Philistines, and Jesus preaching love and curing the sick.

Or they drew inspiration from the classics: Socrates defying Athens in the name of truth; Roman citizens defending their republic, with the empire growing mighty and then breaking down from its own debauchery; the real Renaissance; the Enlightenment, that great skeptical inquiry; or from home-spun American values of liberty and democracy.

Today, the university president is a corporate functionary who reduces students to consumers. As David Greenberg has put it, the “shrinking college president” has exchanged the role of moral leader for that of chief fundraiser.⁴

Excepting graduation ceremonies, I have seen President Jackson once in four years and Provost Phelps twice. These administrators don’t talk about the life of the mind. They don’t talk about democracy or justice. Instead, they talk about “customers” and “productivity.” The “shrinking college president” is an apt metaphor for the condition of the university as a whole.

Academics in the humanities throw terms like “discourse” around. We discuss how “discourse”

shapes identity and the possibilities for social life. But we don’t do enough to maintain a discourse that competes against the “incorporation” of the university. Meanwhile, the university exemplifies both the benefits and the drawbacks of a corporate system that is increasingly grotesque in its almost total triumph.

The free-wheeling society of late 20th century America offers previously unavailable opportunities for individual exploration and the cultivation of talents and interests. At the same time, it fosters a terrible passivity, powerlessness, and emptiness. It encourages shallowness and speed. The university reflects this.

The University of Rochester seems to be a machine that runs of itself. Professors and graduate students stay in our own holes. We concentrate on our own expertise. Things fall from the sky. The university experience is the perfect preparation for the kind of society where citizens have transformed into consumers, decisions are imposed from above, and people harbor unfocused frustration towards a system so difficult to comprehend.

When college students work in retail or food chains across the nation, they are forced to listen over and over again to music dictated by anonymous officials in far-

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flung offices. But if they attend the University of Rochester, this will not faze them.

Anybody who has experienced a real community—whether in a neighborhood association, a house of worship, in a political or religious movement, in a co-op or a commune, or at a college that fosters community—knows that institutions like the University of Rochester are sorely lacking.

According to the mission statement of the University of Chicago, the university should be as upsetting as Socrates. Stop and think about that. Socrates really upset a lot of people. President Jackson does not pretend to operate on this principle.

But in the late 1960s and early 1970s, universities—even the University of Rochester—were on the forefront of social movements that, for all their excesses, were as upsetting as Socrates, and potentially as liberating.

From his perch at Yale, Charles Reich predicted “the greening of America,” while Theodore Roznack looked “beyond the wasteland.” To many, it seemed that the “age of Aquarius” really was dawning. The new world they imagined would be filled with racial justice, sexual equality, and sexual freedom, a new spirituality, an emphasis upon creativity and self-expression, an environmental ethic, and a search for

community instead of conformity to a bottom line that treats people like things.

When college students today take racial and sexual equality for granted, when they take ethnic studies classes, women’s studies classes, and environmental studies classes, when they freely express homosexual desire, when they relish the relaxed discipline of campus life, when men grow their hair long and women cut it short, when they have sex in their dorm rooms or live together in what used to be called “sin,” when they take yoga or explore Buddhism, recycle their trash, or eat tofu, when, in short, they live, they often don’t realize the extent to which the movements of the 1960s established the range of choices they confront. The coffee shop in Wilson Commons serves soy milk.

Yet, for all this change, some things have remained remarkably constant. Except for its focus on the Cold War, the Port Huron Statement, with its expression of student discontent with both the university and the larger society, written by University of Michigan students before the upheavals of the 1960s, is still relevant.⁵

Americans complain these days about a decline in values, a decline in political participation, the loss of

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community, a social turbulence they feel powerless to control. I know there are no easy solutions. But shouldn't universities lead by example? Instead of reflecting the world outside so well, shouldn't the universities create small worlds for the outside world to emulate?

We need more of what activist scholar Todd Gitlin calls "commonality politics."⁶ Mere complaints about the "incorporation" of the university don't help. The early New Left represented by the Port Huron Statement offered such a vision. As the young people who gathered at Port Huron, Michigan, in 1962 asked, "How can a social order work well if its best thinkers are skeptics, and is man really doomed forever to the domination of today?"⁷

Administrators have managed the university according to their own lights because academics have abdicated responsibility. We cloister ourselves in our offices and E-mail distant colleagues instead of building local communities. We mistake publishing articles in obscure journals or speaking at equally obscure conferences for the kind of politics that will transform the world.

We lose ourselves in the culture wars that rage across the academic landscape. We mistake the linguistic academic Left politics for the

kind of politics those inside and outside that phantom ivory tower desperately need now.

But academic politics and the culture wars are not the central problem. As Christopher Lasch points out in his posthumous book *The Revolt of the Elites*:

It is corporate control, not academic radicalism, that has 'corrupted our higher education.' It is corporate control that has diverted social resources from the humanities into military and technological research, fostered an obsession with quantification that has destroyed the social sciences, replaced the English language with bureaucratic jargon, and created a top-heavy administrative apparatus whose educational vision begins and ends with the bottom line.⁸

In short, we've been transformed from citizens to consumers. Everybody has been talking about "globalization." Free marketers have been drinking heady wine. Tenured professors have weighed their growing nest eggs with satisfaction.

Corporations have outgrown the nation state and expanded into every facet of life. Walmart, Inc. is a larger economic entity than Poland, Israel, or Greece. Ford, Inc. is larger than South Africa.⁹

It is our responsibility to help create new social possibilities and a new common politics that overflow the campus.

While academics in the humanities focus on “identity,” “difference,” and “deconstruction,” American politicians win election after election on “low tax” platforms. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with low taxes, but the mind-numbing concentration on it as a campaign theme reflects an impoverishment of possibilities. It is a negative vision. A politics built upon “low taxes,” like the academic focus on identity and difference to the exclusion of commonality politics, is for people who want only their own backyards to mow.

There are other possibilities. As a child, I attended Pete Seeger concerts where together we sang “Amazing Grace” and “We Shall Over Come.” Then, and at other times since, I’ve had glimpses of the transformative power of commonality politics.

Such a politics is necessary as Americans inside and outside academia confront a common homogenizing corporate universe. Academics have a particular role to play in helping to imagine and to build alternatives.

Professors enjoy a level of autonomy that mystifies the uninitiated and frustrates those who want a clear-cut measurement of productivity. Professors choose their own co-workers. Perhaps more astonishing to most workers, professors manage their own time.¹⁰

Recent debates and past court decisions suggest that professors’ peculiar situation and unusual control of their work make it difficult to classify them as either management or labor. The institutions of democracy are established at the university in a manner that does not exist for most Americans. And academics are blessed with education and time to think.

Besides withstanding the forces that are attempting to mold the university into a smoothly running corporation, it is our responsibility as faculty to help create new social possibilities and a new common politics that overflow campus boundaries.

The original idea of devoting myself to the university did not stem from any desire on my part to open up a history store or even a history mall. As a graduate student in my sixth year, I am painfully aware that I could have earned almost two law degrees by now. If I had chosen medicine, I could be operating on hearts and saving lives instead of making about 15 dollars an hour as an adjunct instructor. From a purely objective perspective, the years of quiet toil required for a Ph.D. in the humanities don’t seem worth it.

Of the 1.2 million college teachers in the United States, only about 25 percent are tenured, and this

proportion is decreasing. According to *The New York Times*, "Almost half of four-year faculty and 65 percent of two-year faculty are part-timers."¹¹

On one level, none of this matters: I entered graduate school for riches that cannot be measured. The university that I expected, however, is not the university that I found.

In the autumn of 1997, the University of Rochester administration renamed the office that deals with student affairs the "Customer Service Department."

For the 1998-99 academic year the University of Rochester increased the graduate student "continuation fee" while keeping graduate student stipends stagnant. Administrators have not made the amount of their own salary increases public, but they

have refurbished their offices with luxurious dark woods. And again, dining options on campus have been rearranged.

Airport malls have their place. But is any "Renaissance" worth its name about selling Taco Bell burritos or Blimpies subs? We could take all of the airport malls in New York State and place them on the University of Rochester campus and this still would not be enough.

I don't have the answers: I am just a guy in a city by the Erie Canal struggling to finish a dissertation. But I have written this article in the hope that it will strike a chord, that others will share the dissatisfaction that I have expressed. As I continue to admire the weathered bricks that make up the facade of Wilson Commons, I think about Porter Butts and his vision. ■

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Endnotes

¹ Octavio Paz, "The Flight of Quetzalcoatl and the Quest for Legitimacy," forward in Jacques Lafaye, *Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe: The Formation of Mexican National Consciousness, 1531-1813*, trans. Benjamin Keen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

² *Currents*, January 23, 1995, 4.

³ Herbert Croly, *Progressive Democracy* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1914), 422.

⁴ *The New Republic*, 1 June 1998.

⁵ Students For a Democratic Society, *The Port Huron Statement* (Chicago, Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1990).

⁶ Todd Gitlin, "The Rise of 'Identity Politics,' An Examination and a Critique," in *Higher Education Under Fire*, ed. Carey Nelson and Michael Berube (New York: Routledge, 1995), 308-325. This is an excellent essay, which I have borrowed from here. According to Gitlin, the term "commonality politics" was suggested to him by Robert Jay Lifton.

⁷ *The Port Huron Statement*, 17.

⁸ Christopher Lasch, "Academic Pseudo-Radicalism" in *The Revolt of the Elites*

and the Betrayal of Democracy (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 192-193.

⁹ For these and other similar figures see Tony Clarke and Maude Barlow, *The Multinational Agreement on Investment and the Threat to American Freedom* (New York: Apex Press, 1998).

¹⁰ For an excellent discussion of the benefits and freedoms of an academic life, see Stanley Aronowitz, "The Last Good Job in America," *Social Text* 15 (summer 1997): 93-108.

¹¹ Brent Staples, *New York Times*, 29 June 1997.

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