

# A populist wake-up call for universities

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For many, universities do not represent opportunity or self-realization, but instead elite self-regard and academic exchanges in which



they see no relevance. What can faculty do to change these perceptions?

Can we step out of our bubble for a moment? I hope so, because unless we do we will not see that we are losing the battle.

What battle is that? Just the one for the hearts and minds of our fellow citizens, within the nation and without. Just the contest between the forces of rationality and those of darkness and ignorance. Just the eternal struggle to make ideas, and not force, relevant to the plight of those oppressed by ignorance and bad rhetoric. Just that.

If you have not seen the mainstream media lately, if you prefer more filtered sources of experience or retreats into sanity, maybe this is not obvious. However, a glimpse into the abyss of larger public discourse is enough to make the point vivid. Academic research, once celebrated as the vanguard of the best that was thought and expressed, is on the run. Enrolments are down. Public denunciations are routine, running a gamut from casual dismissal (“useless” degrees and the like) to open hostility (“incubators of social justice warriors,” “ideological fog-machines,” etc. etc.).

You can dismiss these bleats if you like. Of course, the comments boards of right-wing newspapers are no place to

look for sane assessment of a liberal education. Of course, there are columnists who will base their flailing careers on mocking a world they do not understand.

This move, a reversal of the injunction to check your privilege, is swiftly self-defeating. Enforce your privilege is not much of a rallying cry, after all, at least when it comes to the rational justification of living the life of the mind with ironclad tenure and on a Sunshine List salary. Is that all we have, a retreat into a cocoon of superiority? Rex Murphy and Margaret Wentz may be doltish on the subject, but saying so does not really meet the case, does it? They have a point, especially when it comes to the traditional liberal education, once thought to be an instrument of emancipation.

Inside, meanwhile, things are not much better. The neoliberal overproduction of graduate students, essential for government funding and steady supplies of sessional teaching, is a pyramid scheme of such magnitude that in another sector it would warrant regulatory intervention. For example, placement rates for tenure-track jobs in humanities have been stuck at about 30 per cent for years, with no discernible effect on intake. Not for nothing is grad-school culture lately compared to a cult, where the desires of the innocent are blithely annexed to a system that chews up individual will as cheap labour. Citing the palpable desire of junior scholars to enter an academic field is akin to college football coaches shrugging away the fact that young men are more than willing to endure life-shortening concussions in pursuit of a one-percentile payoff.

Here is an idea: think of every graduate admission as a sort of concussion waiting to happen. (In case anyone cares, I am currently director of graduate studies in my department, a job nobody wants; I do my best to be, at least, honest.)

Against this background, indulgences such as the “slow professor” movement, however well intentioned, constitute a somewhat sick joke—something that renders the notion of “First World problem” wildly inadequate. I am sure that people feel rushed to produce journal articles and positive teaching evaluations, to sit on this committee or that. But can you seriously compare this to actual work? Surely, there is a better term for such high-end special pleading. Ultra-first-world problem? Point-one-per-cent lament?

The humanities and social sciences often appear to be scholarly echo chambers, driven by prize-chasing and chatter-swapping that is only of interest to a comfortable few. The emancipatory promise of learning, once the core mission, lies broken on the floor. There is no freedom here, no route to self-realization. There may be, in some cases, employment. But there is, less defensibly, the mere carapace of radical politics, a pathetic shell of commitment polished and maintained by a collective delusion that what we do still makes a difference to the larger world.

Let me put it in this contentious way: The only justification for the privileges we enjoy is that they should work to make the world better, in some sense of that word. This is, *mutatis mutandis*, a basic tenet of any theory of justice, whether it is John Rawls’ notion of distributive fairness, Mill’s utilitarianism, or Hume’s regulation of moderate scarcity. There may be no direct material results from our work, but there should be intangible ones: the accretion of wisdom, a deepened sense of what it means to be here. Privilege for its own sake is malign. Intellectual privilege is complacency dressed up with fancy vocational window-dressing.

Look, I know: crisis in our universities is a familiar trope. We have heard all of this before, and scholarship keeps making its steady headway. Stop worrying! Keep your head down, make a contribution, be moderately nice to your colleagues and students, and take home the pay. There are worse ways to measure a mortal span.

I sympathize with this attitude, I really do. Sometimes, like many of us, all I want to do is go to the library and make notes for an article or critical notice, which I am certain will not be read by more than a few like-minded colleagues. Moreover, I am as impatient as anyone with the misrepresentations of what happens in our classrooms and on our campuses. I have no interest in indoctrination, preach no particular political line in lectures, and do not believe my students ought to exit a course as fired-up activists, just as more thoughtful citizens.

But, friends, we are losing. We are losing when it comes to reason and critical intelligence and civility. We are losing when it comes to the basic justification of what we do. We are losing on defending universities as forces for good.

Populism might be a political force we revile, but its lesson cannot be ignored: for the vast majority of people, universities do not represent opportunity or self-realization but elite self-regard, out-of-touch levels of comfort, and a discourse that enjoys no traction on the politics of everyday life.

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Assuming that we see this as a problem that needs to be addressed, what can we do about it?

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As a fan of campus literature, I always read with some envy the depictions of earlier iterations of academic life. I think of Evelyn Waugh, John Williams, Iris Murdoch, or Willa Cather—even David Lodge, Kingsley Amis, and Malcolm Bradbury. Whether taken seriously or wrapped in the chilly embrace of satire, professors in these worlds enjoy implicit status because of their learning. Undergraduates accept authority and the idea that a bachelor's degree is a good in and of itself. The public at large considers a liberal-arts degree a mark of distinction, the sign of potential, not a sad comment on bad life-choices.

I do not need to tell you that this has all entirely vanished. Universities are now sites of consumer preference and casual student entitlement. Expertise in something as frangible as poetry and philosophy is a matter of routine mockery. Administrators multiply at a rate unknown to any other walk of life. Passionate interest in ideas, meanwhile, is considered a sign of eccentricity, something to be deprecated among the post-grad barista class as adolescent indulgence.

From behind the retail counter, Thoreau's cry in *Walden* (1854) about intellectuals as rational rebels for humanity sounds a romantic note. "There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers," he intoned. "To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically."

If only. So, the question becomes one of what other possibilities exist given current conditions. Is there any life in the traditional promise of liberal learning? Suppose we denied ourselves the comfortable retreat into privilege, a return to the bubble, what would our duties be then? And what would be the real outcomes, not the ones measured by the dean's office apparatchiks?

*Is there any life in the traditional promise of liberal learning?*

We can note several false trails right from the start. The worst possible course of action is to try to recast liberal learning according to a reductive notion of utility. This is the error coiled in the heart of every faculty demand for learning outcomes and transferable skills. Sure, there are such outcomes and skills emerging from the ether of classes in metaphysics or pure mathematics. However, if we assess those classes on their ability to generate such results, we commit two errors—one theoretical and one practical.

The theoretical error is counted as such only by those who are already committed to these esoteric pursuits. Utility-

based arguments for math and metaphysics mistake the true value of these undertakings, erasing their special appeal. This is, alas, academic inside baseball. However, the practical error follows immediately and should be obvious to anyone. If we are really concerned with enhancing writing, critical reasoning, or calculating skills, teaching the works of David Lewis and Georg Cantor is a preposterously inefficient way of going about it. Life skills may be emergent properties of postsecondary study; they cannot ever be its point.

It is equally dangerous to devolve university education to either of two popular notions of self-fulfilment. One of these holds that education is entirely for the benefit of an individual subject: the so-called “mental spa” model. On this understanding, in public systems anyway, the taxpayers of a jurisdiction shoulder the costs of unequally distributed luxury goods, in the form of time and opportunity to read, write, and hang out for several years. Tuition provides a necessary cover of personal investment in this high-end experience, but in fact rarely covers the full costs.

The flip-side of this indulgent vision is the popular idea that education must be a matter of radicalization. The notion has a long and respectable history, and there is a kernel of truth in it that must be acknowledged beyond the newspaper caricatures of “political correctness,” that mythical bugbear, and the clichéd talk of microaggressions, safe spaces, and victimhood.

As Paolo Freire reminds us in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), education is either a trap-door into the current arrangement or an escape-hatch into freedom. However, there are sometimes side-traps and bait-and-switch games concealed within the passageways of thought. Freedom need not be standard leftist politics. In fact, it need not, and should not, be any specific counter-ideology at all. Critical intelligence means questioning all easy habits of thought; including the ones we indulge in service of our own political desires.

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It has been some years since I last read Cardinal Newman’s *Idea of a University* (1852), but in thinking about this article, I was motivated to crack my old paperback copy. It is well thumbed. I bought it for a class I still recall, a first-year ‘great books’ evening course, co-taught in the far-off year of 1980 by two historians—one of them the award-winning Kenneth Bartlett, now a colleague.

Newman’s basic religiosity remains at odds with his self-avowed secularism about education, and his elitism is presumptive, as with any book from the era. Nevertheless, the optimism of his view is forever inspiring. The defence of education as an end in itself, in fact as the discernment of ends rather than means, is timeless. Students, Newman argues, must learn “to think and to reason and to compare and to discriminate and to analyze.” That is the point; that is the idea.

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It happens that this spring is the tenth anniversary of a program run at the University of Toronto called “Humanities for Humanity.” My friends John Duncan and Kelley Castle, along with a host of student and faculty volunteers, have run this innovative series with extraordinary success over this decade.

In the program, people from different walks of city life, recruited through community centres and downtown churches, attend a series of lectures and discussion groups. They read very canonical material and hear from professors interested in the topics. (I have lectured every year on Machiavelli’s *The Prince*; also lately on Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* in a related program called “Theatre for Thought”.) There is a hearty dinner and free childcare, formal certificates at the end, and, above all, an intellectual fellowship I have not seen anywhere else.

Some 500 students have been inspired by the original program over the years, with another 300 graduating from the

theatre-based offshoot. These might seem like small numbers, compared to the massive waves of populism that contend with the very idea of a university, and the huge annual intakes of students at all levels of our system. But, I can tell you that there is nothing in my experience more moving than to hear someone, excluded by language or background from regular attendance, wax emotional about the simple chance to attend a university lecture on power, or identity, or faith.

Speaking of faith, nothing renews my faith in the value of education more reliably than spending time with these students. A program like this will not solve the structural problems of graduate-school exploitation and the new academic precariat. It will not serve as a one-line reply to know-nothings and dopes who court a bogus populism with anti-intellectual ridicule and their comfortable salaries. However, it might sketch the beginnings of an argument about why we do what we do, why it matters, and how it affects actual people.

Our own students are rarely as grateful as these people, who are usually older and coming from situations of deprivation and often oppression. However, as Newman and Freire and a host of us have reason to know, planting the seeds of wisdom is not the same thing as witnessing its flowering. We cannot know, in advance, what effect our ideas and their halting expression will have on the individuals who pass before us in lecture halls, maybe bored and thinking of other things, irritated at the sheer non-utility of it all.

And yet, we go on because we believe in the mission. Or we should. It seems to me that the natural consequence of charges of elite privilege is a dangerous cynicism: the idea that this is all a game, a lottery where tenured faculty are the lucky winners after whom the door slams shut. Good luck, suckers! I'm all right!

Whenever I think about these questions of value, and the ends of university education, I recall the first hard years of my post-PhD career. The job market was experiencing another one of its cyclical crises. My home department at Yale, was in disarray and plummeting in reputation (there were no formal rankings then, just word-of-mouth taint). I struggled to find work, cobbling together what, nowadays, appears to be a fairly typical path: a post-doc, a sessional job, a limited appointment, tantalizing prospects of tenure-track jobs, along with various reversals and disappointments. I applied to join the Foreign Service, contemplated law school, and wrote for money. Of course I did.

Not surprisingly, I resented people who seemed to swan their way from graduate school into tenure-track jobs. I also recall the humiliation of having my name removed from a departmental mailbox because my re-appointment in the folding chair was briefly held up. "You don't teach here anymore," I was told. I'm glad those days are gone, but I don't ever forget them. I am one of the lucky, lucky few: I made it into the clubhouse—or at least one chamber of its rigged, rickety expanse.

I will say it again: it is despicable to enjoy the fruits of academic success and not feel a profound sense of obligation. People who exist outside our bubble feel this too: hence the anger, the contempt, the disdain—and, maybe worst of all, the indifference. Still, we are all citizens together, and the world of the university is as real as anything else that transpires here in the sublunary realm. There is a call to community audible underneath all the hostility.

So I choose to believe, anyway. Every academic I know will tell you that she or he has many, many jobs. Sometimes, to be sure, it can feel like too many. But one of them, maybe the most important one, is to demonstrate why our efforts have wider value than just our personal satisfaction. That is not quite a new pedagogy of the oppressed, but maybe it is a start. AM

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