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Executive Summary

The instructor stands at the piano and fingers the chords to "In the Still of the Night." Five young men in the second row rumble the bass line, "Yeh-up . . . yuh-yep . . . yeh-hup . . . yuh-yup. . . ." About 10 young women scattered around the classroom sway and purse their lips, doo-wopping, "Shoo-shoo, shoo be doo . . . shoo-shoo, shoo be dooo shoo-shoo, shoo be doo wop, wop, wop, wop. . . ." (1)

Welcome to the groves of academe, in this case the University of Georgia's Music 418, "History and Analysis of Rock Music." If you've been away for a while, you might not immediately recognize the new face of American scholarship, or the other innovations of the modern university. Although notable for its progressive approach to class discussion, Music 418 is not, unfortunately, atypical of the nuggets of wisdom offered throughout the catalogs of the nation's institutions of higher learning.

Students making their way through the academic shopping mall of the modern university's curriculum are tempted with options ranging from the "Sociology of Sociability" (the study of parties) at Vassar, to "Poets Who Sing" at Washington University, to "Ultimate Frisbee" at the University of Massachusetts, and "Dance Roller Skating" at Kent State. Yes, and all of the courses mentioned are for academic credit.

At the University of Illinois, students can work toward their B.A. by taking "Pocket Billiards" or the "Anthropology of Play," which is described as "the study of play with emphasis on origin, diffusion, spontaneity, emergence, and diversity." Auburn University offers a course in "Recreation Interpretive Services," which is described as "principles and techniques used to communicate natural, historical, and cultural features of outdoor recreation to park visitors." Occasionally, students stumble upon the mother lode, such as those lucky few who enrolled in "Applied Social Theory and Qualitative Research Methodology" at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Known affectionately as "Deadhead 101," its course materials consist of Grateful Dead cassettes and reviews of past shows. Students are required to attend Grateful Dead concerts to "observe the subculture that surrounds the band." (2)

Students fortunate enough to gain admission to California State University's "Music Video 454" can sit at the feet of Professor Alan Bloom, who declares, "I want students thinking about television." Or at least about MTV. The class's only textbook is the Rolling Stone Book of Rock Video, and one class project has been a field trip to Hollywood where the students acted as extras in rock videos, for credit. On slower days, they have analyzed videotapes of Weird Al Yankovic singing "Dare to Be Stupid." (3)

Even those offerings, however, pale in comparison with the by-now-legendary "Rock 'n' Roll Is Here to Stay" at Brown. An article in the *New Republic* by former Brown student Philip Weiss quoted one student enthusing, "You

could go to class and listen to the White Album," to which another student responded, "You don't have to go to class. I'd turn on the stereo and raise my hand in bed."(4)

Such random anecdotes of scholarly whimsicality could perhaps be dismissed as isolated aberrations that are unrepresentative of higher education as a whole. But there is more troubling evidence.

For most of the past decade, tuition has risen far faster than inflation, far outpacing the growth in family income. By 1990, the cost of four years at an elite private college had passed the median price of a house in the United States. But a survey sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1989 found that a majority of college seniors would flunk even a basic test on Western cultural and historical literacy: 25 percent could not distinguish between the thoughts of Karl Marx and the United States Constitution (or between the words of Winston Churchill and those of Joseph Stalin), 58 percent did not know Shakespeare wrote *The Tempest*, and 42 percent could not place the Civil War in the correct half-century. Most seniors were unable to identify the Magna Carta, Reconstruction, or the Missouri Compromise; they were "clearly unfamiliar" with Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment*, and Martin Luther King's "Letter from the Birmingham Jail."(5)

There once was a time when employers could be reasonably certain that college graduates had a basic sense of the world and, as a minimum, could write a coherent business letter. That is simply no longer the case.

Fewer than 15 percent of the seniors who were tested on their knowledge of world affairs in 1981 could answer even two-thirds of the questions correctly. Not a single student scored higher than 84 correct answers out of a total of 101 questions. Most ominously, the group that scored lowest was education majors, who averaged a pathetic 39.8.(6)

Another survey found that 75 percent of college students had studied a foreign language at one time or another, but that only 7 percent felt they could understand a native speaker.(7) Occasional surveys of college students' knowledge of geography have yielded horrific results. A 1984 survey of University of North Carolina students found that 69 percent could not identify a single African country between the Sahara and South Africa (there are 28), fewer than 50 percent could name the two largest states in the United States; 88 percent could not identify the five Great Lakes, and only 27 percent knew that Manila is located in the Philippines. In 1987, a survey at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh found that 25 percent of the students in a geography class could not locate the Soviet Union on a world map. On a map of the 48 contiguous states, only 22 percent could identify 40 states or more.(8)

Of course, a liberal education is not merely the knowledge of a set of facts. It is certainly more important to understand the intellectual roots of the American Revolution than the dates of various battles. But evidence suggests that American college students know neither.

All of this is shocking, but perhaps not surprising, given the priorities and the structure of the modern American university. Put bluntly, our universities feel they have more important things to do than actually ensure that their students learn anything.

A staff member of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, for example, found that few two- or four-year colleges required that a student demonstrate "true proficiency in anything as a condition for receiving a degree, fewer still that set clear learning objectives and unambiguous standards for academic performance. . . ." In fact, the American Council on Education found that only 15 percent of universities require tests for general knowledge, only 17 percent for critical thinking, and only 19 percent for minimum competency.(9) Some students at major universities report that they have gone three or even four years without ever writing a paper.(10)

Not surprisingly, Ernest Boyer of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Learning complained in 1987 that American colleges had become "more successful in credentialing than in providing a quality education for their students."(11)

This brings us to the central paradox of American higher education in 1990, in which more and more is being spent for less and less. In large measure this is the inevitable consequence of federal policies toward higher education that have pursued wildly contradictory goals.

While the government has encouraged the largest possible number of students to attend institutions of higher education, it has simultaneously guaranteed that many of those students will receive--at best--a mediocre education. For higher education, the embrace of federal largess has proven to be a classic Faustian bargain. The legacy of federal intervention in higher education includes the following:

- The flight from teaching by the nation's professoriate;
- The explosion of "research"--much of which is worthless, if not meretricious;
- The infusion of the federal bureaucracy into the universities, which have embraced the giantism of their federal mentors;
- The growth of a culture of academic entitlement in which university professors come to believe they have an inherent right to public support to pursue their own interests, regardless of the impact on students; and
- The distortion of undergraduate education and the curriculum into a crude numbers game that virtually dictates the breakdown of academic integrity and standards.

That is certainly not the case on every campus; there are many institutions where teaching--and learning--are still the top priorities. But they are seldom the ones who have been most penetrated by the generosity of the federal government.

Here Come the Feds

Johns Hopkins University receives more federal research support than any other U.S. university. In 1987, federal research and development grants totaled \$476.3 million. In addition, the school has raised more than \$512 million from private donors during the past five years.

But as it opened its doors in the fall of 1989 for the new academic year, Johns Hopkins had no faculty member in its classics department who could teach Greek literature or philosophy and none who could lecture on Plato's "Republic," Sophocles's "Oedipus Rex," or Homer's "Odyssey." In its small way, the fate of the classics at one of the nation's most lavishly funded universities casts a revealing light on the often perverse role of the federal government in the modern mega-university.(12)

Despite Johns Hopkins's research riches, the administration revealed in 1988 that the School of Arts and Sciences--the liberal arts core of the university--had run up a deficit of \$4 million and projected a shortfall of \$7 million in 1989. That deficit has resulted not merely in an administrative shakeup, but in the imposition of a draconian five-year financial plan that includes steep increases in tuition, a 10 percent cutback in costs of the liberal arts faculty, and the elimination of several academic programs.(13)

This budget crunch amid so much apparent wealth highlighted the paradox of the federal role in higher education.

Former education secretary William Bennett captured this peculiar interplay of cash with academia with a formula: "X dollars buys the student one professor; 2X dollars buys him two. But 3X and 4X and 5X dollars gradually remove the professor from the student and 6X dollars may replace all the classroom professors with graduate students." The discomfiture of Johns Hopkins was merely Bennett's law writ large.

Of the \$476 million the university received in federal research and development grants in 1987, the amount allocated to the School of Arts and Sciences was a mere 3.7 percent. In the absence of an institutional commitment to compensate for the imbalance, the liberal arts inevitably became the raggedy stepchildren of the university.(14)

That might be written off as an aberration except for the distinctive role that Johns Hopkins has played as the prototypical American research university. Johns Hopkins did more to shape the new academic culture of the American university in the late 19th and early 20th centuries than any other institution; keeping up with Hopkins has

been a national academic obsession since the day it opened in 1876.

In recent years, that hasn't been easy to do. Johns Hopkins has been one of higher education's most successful growth industries. Its operating budget grew from \$88.5 million in 1972 to \$557 million in 1988--a robust 529 percent increase. The largest single factor was Uncle Sam.(15) In 1967, Johns Hopkins ranked 15th in its share of federal research funding. By the early 1980s, it had vaulted into the top position, where it has remained.(16)

That growth paralleled the increasing role of the federal government in American higher education in the years after World War II. While the federal government created vast new research centers, laboratories, and federally endowed institutes, it also provided a case study in the law of unintended consequences. By shifting the focus of higher education from undergraduate to graduate education and from teaching to research, federal money reshaped academic priorities.

In retrospect, it is clear that 1945 is the Great Divide in the history of higher education. The volatile admixture of cash, prestige, and power fashioned a new sort of university.

Imbued with a post-war confidence bordering on arrogance, the modern university developed the taste for sheer mass and weight that typified post-war America and that would shape the nation's military, corporate, and cultural thinking. Often the lines between various enterprises would blur as universities became research extensions of the federal government and began to think of themselves as "knowledge factories," in Clark Kerr's unfortunate, if memorable, phrase. The newly flush universities quickly adopted the rhetoric of entrepreneurship but inherited the grammar of bureaucracy. During the student rebellion of the 1960s, the universities would be bitterly attacked for their impersonality and interlocking relationships with government and business. Many criticisms struck home because the universities had become so tied into the infrastructure of the modern world that they had assumed a shape that would have been virtually unrecognizable to a pre-war academic. Those were higher education's go-go years in which colleges redoubled their efforts to become universities, while universities mutated into vast, impersonal, research-dominated multiversities. Teaching loads dwindled, class sizes skyrocketed, and curriculums were increasingly tailored to accommodate the new priorities.

The mushroom cloud over Hiroshima not only demonstrated the value of the universities for national security but opened breathtaking new vistas for the scientists themselves. Neither the government nor the academics were slow in capitalizing on the possibilities. Henceforth, the Manhattan Project would serve as a shadowy paradigm for the new university. Science, particularly federally funded science, became the dominant factor in university priorities, and the values of the laboratory quickly came to dominate the overall values of the university itself. If "scholarship" had been the focus of the German university, now the focus was funded research. Even if funds were not available, the shift to the research culture--the heart of the scientific enterprise--gradually made itself felt through the other disciplines.

The result of the new flood of federal cash, as Columbia University's Jacques Barzun would later write, was

interlocking of university prestige specifically with contract money: without contracts you cannot "buy" the best graduate students, because the best want to do only research and none of the teaching they did before. Nor can you attract the best scientists, because they want the best students and the most expensive equipment, plus the summer bonus of two-ninths or three-ninths charge-able to the contract. Note in passing that this closed circuit takes away from teaching half the senior men and the best juniors.(17)

The impact of the new priorities was graphically highlighted at Harvard where the number of departments and degree-granting committees in the College of Arts and Sciences rose by almost a third. Between 1952 and 1974, the size of the faculty more than doubled; the graduate student population jumped by 45 percent; but the number of undergraduates rose by only 14 percent. The most dramatic fact of all was that during a period of rapid and incessant growth, the number of courses in which undergraduates were enrolled fell by 28 percent. Over a period of 22 years, the number of Harvard professors had risen from 300 to 608 but, noted one critic with massive understatement, "the indication was that contact between undergraduates and professors had not increased proportionately."(18) The needs of Harvard's students had obviously not driven the growth in the professorial ranks.

"What counted in recruiting faculty," Phyllis Keller, an administrator at Harvard, later wrote, "was the acquisition of

scientists and scholars who could staff the burgeoning graduate training programs, attract federal research dollars, and establish a school's reputation as a center of knowledge production."(19)

The University of California's Clark Kerr acknowledged the decline of undergraduate education, going so far as to say that "there seems to be a 'point of no return' after which research, consulting, and graduate instruction become so absorbing that faculty can no longer be concentrated on undergraduate education as they once were. This process has been going on for a long time; federal research funds have intensified it. As a consequence, undergraduate education in the large university is more likely to be acceptable than outstanding."(20)

But the effect of federal largess was not limited to the elite research universities. The shift to research changed academic culture as a whole and has exerted a tremendous attraction for schools in the grip of status envy. Often schools saw the prestige and riches and wanted to share in the glory. So they had their faculty turn out a dozen articles and declared it a knowledge explosion. They cut their teaching loads, called themselves research universities, and waited for the day when they would wake up to be Johns Hopkins. It never happened.

What did happen was that many of them eviscerated their undergraduate programs, turning themselves into second-rank teaching schools with third-rate research. Professional accreditation agencies, moreover, began insisting that even the most modest state schools adopt the trappings of their elder siblings.

Inevitably, the greatest impact fell on those faculty members who considered themselves "teachers." At Northwestern University, for example, a recent survey found that only 1 professor in 10 thought that undergraduate teaching was rewarded "quite a bit" or "a good deal." Nearly four times as many said that teaching was rewarded "basically not at all."(21)

The lesson is not lost on young professors. Many told me that to emphasize teaching or to be known primarily as a teacher was to commit professional suicide. As a result, even professors who want to be teachers or who enjoy teaching are closing their doors, cutting down office hours, eliminating papers in their classes, giving multiple choice exams instead of essay exams, and publishing to save their lives. Given the rewards, theirs is a perfectly rational response.

The surge toward research has grown exponentially in recent decades. Part of the intensified push to research grew out of the tightened job market of the 1970s, but the trend also reflected a shift of an order of magnitude in the academic culture's priorities. By the late 1980s, the emphasis on "scholarship" as measured by publication in academic journals had reached a point unimagined by the faculty of the 1950s and early 1960s. Publication records that would once have been deemed sufficient for promotion to full professor at some schools are now insufficient for young professors to win tenure or in some cases even the renewal of their contracts. One measure of the surge in research is the burgeoning number of academic journals. In the sciences alone, there were 8,062 journals in 1978. Between 1979 and 1988, 29,621 new journals were founded.(22) The boom in academic publishing has not, however, been accompanied by a commensurate increase in reading. For the most part the new journals are unread and unreadable, which is not terribly surprising since their primary utility seems to be to bulk up the resumes of their academic authors, rather than to add to the sum of human knowledge.

The growth in publications paralleled the steady increase in federal research outlays, which rose from less than \$5 billion in 1980 to more than \$8.5 billion in 1987.(23)

In the sciences alone, academics are churning out articles for those journals at the rate of two every minute, or 2,880 every 24 hours. That is more than a million a year --a million new nuggets of created wisdom, filling libraries while more and more courses are turned over to graduate students. To cope with the knowledge explosion, academics have not only resorted to counting articles, rather than reading them, but have even gone so far as to set up ways of keeping track of how many times a professor is cited in other professors' footnotes. A remarkable document called the Social Science Citation Index even ranks the top social scientists in order of the times they have appeared in footnotes. (One outgrowth of the footnote fetish is the widespread practice of professors' citing themselves in their own footnotes.)(24)

While many valuable studies are being conducted, too much research is on the order of "Evolution of the Potholder: From Technology to Popular Art," "Submerged Sensuality: Technology and Perceptions of Bathing," or a study on the

phenomenon of high school cheerleading, in which the professorial researcher concluded that cheerleaders are not only an erotic icon but are engaging in an "institutionalized-biological ritual," which he compared to religious symbols that are "polysemous, affective, and prescriptive signs, deriving their power from their multireferential or multivocal nature and their ability to encode a special model of reality."(25)

It is difficult not to come to the conclusion that that sort of thing is intended less to serve the cause of human knowledge than to keep the academic career machine running. Much of it is mere humbug. But it is humbug with a price.

As the pressure to bring in grants mounted, graduate students as well as undergraduates began to feel the shifting priorities. Michael Zimmerman, a biology professor at Oberlin College, recounts a conversation he overheard when he was a graduate student at one of the new multiversities. A student complained that a faculty member did not spend enough time with him. "The professor explained that her research time was more valuable to the university than was her teaching time," Zimmerman recalled. "Faculty members, she said, bring in four times as much money in grant overhead as students pay in tuition. . . . In many places the old slogan 'Publish or Perish' seems to have been retired and replaced with the more lucrative, if less alliterative, 'Find Federal Funding or Perish.'"(26)

The new culture of federal dependency inevitably also affected graduate education. One study by Edward Hackett, a professor at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, found that "the pressure to produce federal grants--and research results to get the grants--tended to result in principal investigators' being less willing to invest time in teaching and supervising the postdoctoral and graduate students working in their labs." Moreover, students received fewer opportunities to pursue independent research and were more likely to develop strictly technical skills rather than learn how to solve problems.(27)

The Orphans of Higher Education

It remains one of history's most poignant ironies that the gadarene rush to research--and away from the classroom -- was accompanied by a dramatic upsurge in the number of students seeking an education in American universities. Again, the transformation was unplanned and unexpected, but it was a direct result of federal policy.

The GI Bill was the biggest surprise of all. Federal officials predicted in 1944 that no more than 70,000 veterans would take advantage of the chance to go to college. The U.S. commissioner of education later upgraded that estimate to 150,000. But by the fall of 1946, a million veterans were enrolled; they represented less than half the total that would take advantage of the free tuition, monthly allowances, and fees that the federal government had promised in the naive expectation that only a handful of vets would take them up on it. "Almost overnight," one historian comments, "the GI Bill changed our ideas about who should go to college."(28)

The flood of veterans into the universities had a ripple effect. It influenced friends, relatives, and even acquaintances and raised expectations throughout society. By the end of the 1960s, the number of graduate students alone would exceed the total number of undergraduates in 1940. By the late 1980s, the number of institutions of higher education would almost double; the number of students would increase eightfold.

But even though a new class of student was flooding into the universities, the promise of democratization was being turned into an often cruel hoax--because the influx of new students could scarcely keep up with the outflow of professors fleeing the classroom.

There is a widely circulated cartoon that captures the result. It shows a huge lecture hall filled with students. Behind the podium stands a woman wearing an apron and carrying a wash bucket and a mop. She is the cleaning woman. She announces to the class: "Your professor is at her publisher's. The TA is doing research. And before he left for the 'Today Show,' the chair asked me to lead today's class on the Divine Comedy."

Although there is no evidence that major universities have, in fact, resorted to using the janitorial staff to teach literature courses, the cartoon does make a provocative point about what is happening in higher education, at least at large universities that brag loudly and often about their eminent faculty and Nobel laureates. Not surprisingly, students arrive on campus expecting that they will be taught by those eminent men and women. In fact, the only time they may

see them is as a blur in the parking lot. In any other business, that tactic would be called "bait and switch." In the American university, it is called higher education.

The fact is that undergraduates at those schools often find themselves herded into huge lecture classes of 300, 700, even 1,000 students. And they find that many classes are taught not by professors at all but by graduate students called teaching assistants, many of whom cannot speak understandable English. Of course, that phenomenon is not true of all schools and is rarely found in community and liberal arts colleges. But, increasingly, such conditions characterize many of the pace-setting institutions in American higher education, including the priciest and most lavishly funded schools.

The role of federal aid is, again, paradoxical. The actual numbers seem to support Bennett's law. One 1984 survey found that at research universities--where the federal role is the largest--61 percent of the professors spent four hours a week or less in undergraduate classes, while 26 percent did not teach undergraduates at all. At doctorate-granting universities, fewer than one in five professors spent 11 or more hours in undergraduate instruction.(29)

The flight from teaching seems to have occurred throughout higher education. In 1980, the average teaching load of college faculty in all institutions of higher education was 10.2 hours a week. Five years later--as research grew in importance--the average teaching load had dropped to 8.4 hours--a 17.6 percent decline. During the same period, college tuition grew at an annual rate of 10.6 percent--more than twice the rate of inflation.(30)

In other words, students and parents were being asked to pay more and more for less and less. The point here is not that professors are lazy; it is that they are not teaching.

That job has been turned over to an academic underclass--cheap labor that is exploited so the faculty can pursue its own interests. Teaching is conducted by parttimers, so-called gypsy professors (who teach a few classes at several colleges), and teaching assistants. In American higher education today, fully one-third of the faculty are part-timers; in some schools, as many as two-thirds of the courses are taught by graduate students, many of them foreign. At Brown University, for example, two-thirds of graduate students in math, half in economics, and 45 percent in engineering are foreign.(31) Nationally, foreign students account for 40 to 60 percent of the doctoral candidates in several crucial areas, including biotechnology, computers, manufacturing technology, microelectronics, and robotics.(32)

Unfortunately, many of the teaching assistants-- despite their competence in their fields--cannot speak understandable English. In 1986, for example, the University of South Carolina tested 20 foreign teaching assistants on their use of English. None passed.(33) Such conditions have turned undergraduate programs in math and the sciences into educational disaster areas. Given the conditions that many students find, it is not surprising that so many potential math and science majors quickly shift to other fields; nor is it surprising that despite the massive infrastructure of American higher education, there are not enough young American scientists in the pipeline to staff our universities in the next century. "A very scary picture is emerging," one professor noted. "We're not producing enough young scientists to staff our universities down the road. We do not have enough Americans."(34) The primary function of some undergraduate science programs seems to be merely to weed out students who are not potential specialists. In that respect, they have been remarkably successful --and then some.

Another inevitable result of the flight from teaching has been the spread and growth of mass classes. Not surprisingly, universities have been particularly zealous in attempting to conceal the extent of the shift. Most popular are official faculty-student ratios that imply that most instruction takes place in small classes.

At the University of Texas, for example, a school notorious for mass classes and impersonal bureaucracy, the administration claimed that it had a student-faculty ratio of roughly 22 to 1. But "Interpersonal Communication Theory" had 570 students, while "Introduction to Psychology" had 392. When the school's president boasted of the 22 to 1 ratio, one student leader complained:

To say his use of the number was misleading would be an understatement. By not explaining what the ratio actually represented, he left people with the impression that it has some relation to classroom conditions. It doesn't. At best, it's a distant cousin of the 500-student lower-division classes undergrads regularly sit through.(35)

Occasionally, schools will claim that a vast majority of classes are taught by faculty and that most courses are small. That reflects only the perspective of the faculty, many of whom teach small seminars on subjects carefully crafted to match their own specialties. The student's point of view is radically different. Berkeley, for example, offers 8,100 courses, but most freshman are crammed into a mere 60 lower-division courses, well under 1 percent of the campus offerings. While Texas officials insisted that less than 1 percent of the campus's classes were mass classes, the student government pointed out that 4,000 students were enrolled in them.

By 1984, nearly 30 percent of students at research universities reported that most or all of their classes had more than 100 students in them; 95 percent reported at least some classes that size.(36) If anything, the problem has escalated dramatically in the six years since that survey was taken.

With so many students chasing so few teaching professors, students often cannot get the courses they need, even in their majors. At some large state schools, it now takes an average of more than five years to get a bachelor's degree. A recent study by the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities indicated the severity of the problem. Its study of 28,000 students nationwide found that only 15 percent of students at four-year universities graduated within four years; fewer than half had a degree after six years.(37)

Several factors may be at work here, including financial pressures that force students to take time off to work or to cut their class loads. Some students have no doubt become enamored with the academic lifestyle and have consciously chosen a more leisurely pace. But it seems obvious that a driving factor has been the inevitable crunch caused by the flight from teaching.

The results of that flight are occasionally bizarre. Some schools have gone so far as to eliminate the human element altogether. Last fall I visited a school that charges more than \$16,000 a year in tuition. In many of its courses it has eliminated papers and essay exams, replacing them with multiple choice tests, which are then graded not by professors or even TAs but by electronic scanning devices. But elimination of humans has also gone one better: in some of the school's large classes, the lectures are not given by a live professor at all; they are given by videotape.(38)

Look ma, no faculty!

Because of the ubiquitous nature of the federal- research culture, that phenomenon is not restricted merely to public institutions. Syracuse University junior Catherine Sessler says,

I'm constantly being approached by students who say they can't understand their teaching assistant: there's no syllabus; they have no idea what the course is about; they're being taught by videotapes; their classrooms are overcrowded; and their professors are inaccessible.(39)

In 1989, Syracuse University raised its tuition nearly 10 percent. This year it will cost \$17,558.(40)

The Numbers Game

The new academic environment created an additional dilemma. How could American universities adjust their standards to accommodate the influx of new students at the same time they were turning away from a focus on teaching those students?

Perhaps inevitably, academia turned to the nomenclature of liberal democracy to justify that revolution. The rush of new students into higher education provided a receptive audience for the argument that the transformation of the academy was the necessary result of democratization. No single characterization captured the new mood more effectively than "diversity," a word resonant with the traditions of pluralism and democracy. As traditionally understood, diversity was the very essence of a liberal education, inasmuch as it reflected the clash of ideas and the suspicion of dogma that informed humanistic study. Now, however, diversity was contorted to serve what was essentially a political agenda.

In 1947, a presidential commission began the codification of diversity as the official ideology of the American

university when it declared: "We shall be denying educational opportunity to many young people as long as we maintain the present orientation of higher education toward verbal skills and intellectual interests." Many young people, the report noted, have different, nonintellectual abilities and cannot receive a proper education if universities continue to insist on recognizing "only one kind of intelligence." Among the diverse sorts of overlooked skills, the report specified were "social sensitivity and versatility, artistic ability, motor skill and dexterity, and mechanical aptitude and ingenuity."(41)

But the University of Chicago's Robert Maynard Hutchins was most concerned about the report's enthusiasm for greater diversity. Hutchins wrote:

Since American institutions of higher education are already so diversified that neither the faculty nor the students can talk with one another except about the weather, politics, and last Saturday's game, the commission's advice is a little like telling a drowning man that he can improve his position by drinking a great deal of water.(42)

It is worthwhile to examine how the process works. It is the rare school, either public or private, whose undergraduate tuition covers the institution's costs. The vast majority of students in higher education is being subsidized, both directly in the form of financial aid and indirectly in the form of state tax dollars.

That system has created a paradox: As a class, undergraduates have proven immensely lucrative to higher education. Without millions of new students, teachers' colleges could not have turned themselves into universities and universities could not have mutated into multiversities. In effect, students are hostages held by the universities to ensure society's continued good will. Therefore, it is important to publicly insist on a commitment to their education.

But if the new students are important as a class their status as individuals is quite different. Because the new students are not really paying their way, they can be safely ignored, while the faculty pursues increasingly lucrative research opportunities. Moreover, given the cheap price of their ticket of admission to higher education, the students are less likely to complain. As long as the legislature continues to foot the bill (as it almost invariably does, given the reluctance of legislators to look too closely into the intricacies of academic finance), the system will work exceedingly well--for the faculty.

The politics of that numbers game virtually dictates the destruction of traditional standards of performance and intellectual integrity. "Guts" are a symbol of the process. The "gut" is an undemanding, unchallenging course of notoriously low standards. But the gut is not an aberration in the modern university; it is the inevitable by-product of the professoriate's desire to expend as little time and energy as possible on teaching combined with the imperative of keeping classrooms stocked with warm tuition-paying bodies.

"Perhaps Socrates or Jesus Christ could educate this range of students, but most faculty cannot walk on water, nor do they care for the taste of hemlock," wrote two academic researchers. But given the "grinding impervious logic" of the numbers game, academia must make compromises. Among the first things to go, the authors argue, are any introductory textbooks "written at a 12th grade reading level or above. . . . Since students can vote with their feet, introductory courses are typically geared to keep the bottom quarter of the skill range from fleeing in panic."(43)

Such pressures have also meant the abolition of reasonable standards of performance. As professor David Berkman, a former chairman of a journalism department at an urban university, wrote:

If two-thirds of the students do not possess the skills necessary for professional success, there is no way you can flunk out a number anywhere near that percentage. There is simply too much intimidation in the academic environment. This is especially true for junior--meaning untenured--faculty members who teach many of the lower division courses where the bulk of the weeding out should take place. . . . No junior instructor who wishes to gain tenure will flunk out 67 percent in an introductory course.(44)

The result, charges Berkman, is rampant pandering.

Such pandering often takes the form of an unspoken bargain between students and faculty throughout nearly the entire

curriculum: "Don't ask too much of me, and I won't ask too much of you." It works for both undergraduates and professors.

That philosophy is reflected throughout the curriculum, where the focus too often is on accommodating the professional needs of the faculty rather than on providing a coherent or well-rounded education for the students.

When the Association of American Colleges issued its report on the state of the curriculum in 1985, its conclusions were not surprising. "[W]hat passes as a college curriculum," the report said, had degenerated into "almost anything goes."

But what distinguished the AAC report from its counter- parts--and indeed from most analyses issued over the past 50 years--was the directness of its indictment. "Central to the troubles and to the solution are the professors . . .," the report charged.

Adept at looking out for themselves--departmental staffing, student enrollments, courses reflecting narrow scholarly interests, attendance at professional meetings--professors unquestionably offer in their courses exquisite examples of specialized learning. But who looks after the shop? Who takes responsibility, not for the needs of the history or English or biology department, but for the curriculum as a whole? Who thinks about the course of study as it is experienced by students? Who reviews and justifies and rationalizes the academic program for which a college awards the coveted credential: a bachelor's degree?
(45)

The answer, of course, was "Nobody."

Even the major, the AAC concluded, had become "little more than a gathering of courses taken in one department, lacking structure and depth." The nature of the majors also "varies widely and irrationally" from one institution to another. The chairman of the Committee for Economic Education of the American Economic Association confirmed that observation, confessing: "We know precious little about what the economics major is or does for students."(46)

There are a number of ways of looking at the student revolution of the 1960s. It reflected, in part, the confluence of the forces unleashed in higher education. The decade saw the most rapid flight from teaching, the growth of the impersonal multiversity, the collapse of standards, the evisceration of curricula, and the rampant inflation of grades. Never have so many been so honored for doing so little.

But the student revolution also provided a clue to what the new policies had wrought--a curriculum and culture of bread, circuses, and guts for the masses.

The new culture has freed the faculty from having to teach broad, general courses outside their specialties. The new research culture unleashed centrifugal forces in the academy by permitting faculty members to design and teach courses of their own devising, carefully crafted to match their own hyperspecialties and career interests. By the 1970s, the fragmentation of the curriculum into a kaleidoscope of unrelated courses was complete. No discipline needed speak to any other. Such was the extent of atomization that even professors in the same field--political science, say--are often incomprehensible to their colleagues with other specializations in political science.

The universities had come to resemble the Tower of Babel far more than the Temple of Knowledge.

As the 1980s drew to an end, it became increasingly difficult to ignore the void at the heart of the enterprise --a moral and intellectual vacuum in which one searches in vain for a remotely coherent sense of the meaning of a college degree.

"The one intolerable thing in education," Mark Van Doren once remarked, "is the absence of intellectual design." But it is possible to graduate from 78 percent of the nation's colleges without ever taking a course in Western civilization, from 38 percent without taking a single course in history, and from 45 percent without taking courses in American or English literature. It is possible to graduate from one-third of the nation's colleges and universities without studying the natural or physical sciences.(47)

It is possible, for example, to fulfill the humanities requirement at Dartmouth--one of the nation's leading liberal arts colleges--with a grab bag of courses that might consist of "Creative Video," "Costume Production," and "American Popular Design." One would also be deemed to have satisfied the liberal arts requirements for the humanities by taking a bundle of such unrelated courses as "Basic Drawing," "Introduction to Modern Brazilian Culture," "Gnosticism and Urban Christianity," and "Seminar in the Music of John Coltrane." (48) Even at Harvard with its so-called core curriculum, it is possible for a student to graduate without having read Shakespeare, Aristotle, or Plato. Students can pass through higher education at the nation's most elite educational institutions in abysmal ignorance of their place in history, the civilization that they inhabit, and the great philosophical debates on what it means to be human.

The unfortunate reality is that to average American college graduates, the literature, history, and science of their culture are often terra incognita; they are likely to have only the vaguest conception of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and the Founding Fathers--to say nothing of the uncertainty principle or the elementary laws of economics. They have no idea what it means to be a member of Western civilization except, perhaps, that their ancestors oppressed someone or other.

It is, of course, still possible to obtain quite a fine education from the nation's institutions of higher learning. They continue to excel at turning out well-trained specialists, rigorously drilled in pre-professional training courses. But with its refusal to exercise intellectual judgment or to challenge what Kenyon College's Thomas Short calls the tendency of the curriculum to "the political, the obfuscatory, and the silly," (49) the modern university has engendered its own form of post-modern academic ignorance, which is an agglomeration of prejudice, dogma, misinformation, and sophistry. Paradoxically, modern students are schooled in the culture of universal skepticism. But they are unarmed for any true confrontation of ideas. That is perhaps inevitable when we have students who take courses in the economic imperialism and oppression of the West but have no background in economics, or who are indoctrinated in the multiform evils of American society without ever having studied its history or institutions, or who explore the philosophical nihilism of deconstructionism without ever having acquired the basics of critical thinking.

What such students are left with is less an intellectual point of view than a posture--a skepticism too feeble and untrained for anything more than the clichés of fashionable prejudice. Because their ideas are seldom genuinely tested, theirs is a style without substance and ultimately without commitment, even to the doctrines of the academic culture itself. The situation is not without its own irony. The graduates of the academic culture are drilled in the rituals of deconstructing their civilization but are understandably at a loss when asked to build anything in its place.

The Bureaucratization of Higher Education

At times, the universities insisted that their mad dash for research funding was a sign that they were becoming more "entrepreneurial." But the notion that a university could be entrepreneurial was--or should have been--absurd on its face. A university is to a business what a tank is to a sports car. Quite simply, entrepreneurs do not have tenure.

Bureaucrats, on the other hand, do. Perhaps the most dramatic sign of the federalization of the universities was their eager adoption of federal-style bureaucracy. Over the past decade alone, university bureaucracies have metastasized at rates that would have drawn a sigh of envy from the Pentagon itself. In the decade ending in 1988, the University of Michigan's faculty grew by 7.1 percent. But during the same period, its bureaucracy grew by 40 percent. What accounts for the disparity? Reported the Ann Arbor News: "U-M officials point to a major increase in research funding as one of the reasons for growth in budget and salaried employees." Michigan was hardly an exception. Ohio State saw a 68.8 percent rise in executive, administrative, and managerial employees between 1977 and 1986; the University of Wisconsin's bureaucracy jumped 101 percent; the University of Pennsylvania's, 43.8 percent; UCLA's, 45 percent. (50)

As federal dollars played an increasing role in institutional priorities, the universities plunged into old-fashioned political pork barreling with a decidedly unacademic zeal. In 1986, Congress allocated more than \$55 million to nine universities, even though none of their projects had undergone competitive review. The universities' fund-raising efforts were so flagrant that Common Cause magazine ran a cover story, featuring three pigs dressed up in cap and gown, under the headline, "Hog Heaven." (51)

The federalization of academic research has, in effect, institutionalized what amounts to an old-boy network among

elite universities. The 20 top campuses received 42 percent of the federal money spent on research and development; while 16 of the top 20 during 1967 were still on the list in the mid-1980s.(52)

Academic Entitlement

If the universities have imbibed the grammar of bureaucracy from the federal government, they have also inherited the spirit of entitlement. That is not, of course, solely the government's fault. The lifetime job guarantee of tenure preceded the influx of federal dollars into higher education and institutionalized academia's imperviousness to accountability.

But an analogy between modern academic culture and the entitlement culture of the government's poverty programs is not out of place. The lavishness of research support has created a reward structure with its own perverse incentives, and it has created a growing class of academics unable (or unwilling) to pursue careers off the government dole. Moreover, it has created a culture in which members of the professoriate insist on their immutable right to a salary and generous perks from the public to pursue their own interests, regardless of the impact on curriculum, students, or the institution as a whole.

Most important of all, the entitlement culture has created the peculiar environment in which faculty can regard their primary customers with scarcely concealed contempt. "Many of our best faculty tell me that they will leave," one University of Illinois dean reports, "if they are forced to teach undergraduates."(53)

Given the culture of academic entitlement, that threat will most likely never have to be acted on. Before faculty are returned to the classroom, a semblance of a rational market system, in which colleges feel an obligation to provide value in return for tuition, must be restored.

The Defense

The academic establishment's defenses, other than outright denial and attempts at obfuscation, tend to fall into three broad categories.

The first is insistence that the universities are not to blame, because they have merely responded to society's demands that they emphasize research. Inevitably, apologists will point to the federal largess as a temptation too great to resist. That can be considered the "I-just-had-to-steal-it-because-they-left-the-keys-in-the-car-Ma!" defense. It is plausible only if we assume that the universities' abdication of moral authority and responsibility was a given.

The second line of defense essentially concedes the broad outlines of the indictment but insists that it applies only to the roughly 6 percent of institutions of higher learning that are research universities. Thus the problem is relatively isolated and limited. That defense ignores two salient facts: (1) 6 percent of institutions produce the bulk of the Ph.D.s in the country, and thus they directly shape the academic culture and priorities of most institutions of higher education; and (2) because of their prestige and tone, the elite universities exert an apparently irresistible upward tug on schools that attempt to enhance their prestige by emulating their "betters."

The third line of defense is simply to accuse critics of being "anti-intellectual." That, of course, assumes that counting footnotes, ignoring undergraduates, and publishing unread and unreadable monographs is intellectual. Unfortunately, everyone who uses magical incantations is not a magician; everyone who speaks in the inscrutable jargon of profspeak is not an intellectual. But the charge of anti-intellectualism allows the universities to avoid discussing their own philistinism; theirs is the ultimate refuge of the academic scoundrel.

There is more than enough blame to go around. Society has vested its universities with unusual privileges and accorded them an immunity from scrutiny that can be justified only by a self-regulated integrity that is no longer present. The result has been an almost superstitious reluctance to inquire too deeply into certain academic programs; the 1980s were the decade of the averted eye. Often it has simply seemed better not to know, an institutionalization of ignorance as the better part of valor. Congress, state legislatures, and foundations have lavishly funded universities and academic research without inquiring whether those institutions indeed serve the ends to which they are ostensibly dedicated or whether they adhere to the standards and principles they claim to represent.

Trustees have basked in the prestige and seeming authority of their roles, often ignorant of their basic responsibilities and unwilling to exercise even a modicum of leadership. Following their lead, administrators have shunned any challenges to the academic culture, even at the cost of basic principles.

Given the diversity in higher education--from Harvard and Stanford to the local community college--there is no single master solution to the crisis. To the extent that remedies do exist, the federal government's role is perhaps the most readily identifiable.

By flooding the universities with federal dollars earmarked not for improving the quality of education but strictly for research, the federal government itself has unbalanced the priorities of the institution. Even worse, it has shifted the loyalties of the faculties from their own schools and students to their disciplines, and from their disciplines to the research agenda dictated by the bureaucrats who increasingly set the research agenda of the academy. Ironically, the government has done so at the same time it has encouraged hundreds of thousands of new students to attend universities. What those students have found and continue to find in the groves of academia is one of the most egregious scandals in American education.

ootnotes

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- (34) *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 15, 1987.
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